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Mediating the Sudanese Conflict: A Challenge for the IGADD

by Francis M. Deng

In September 1993, the member countries of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Desertification (IGADD)—until recently a relatively obscure regional organization coordinating the antidrought/antidesertification programs of a region that includes Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda—undertook to mediate, under the chairmanship of Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi, an end to Sudan's long civil war. The mediators first convened a meeting with the contending Sudanese factions in Kampala, Uganda, in November 1993. A series of meetings followed in January, March, May, July, and September 1994, and (most recently) January 4, 1995. Although no visible progress has yet been made toward peace, it now appears that this initiative has a chance of ending the bloodletting in Africa's largest country.

The IGADD peace initiative has come at a time of critical developments worldwide. In the wake of the cold war, the international community is faced with a proliferation of internal and regional conflicts that is overloading the peacekeeping capacity of the United Nations and the major powers. Africa has been especially hard hit, with millions of innocent lives lost in its civil wars. About 16 million of the world's 30 million internally displaced persons and 7 million of its 20 million refugees are Africans.

The response of the international community is becoming less interventionist, as the end of great-power rivalry and new budgetary limitations discourage outside governments from pursuing activist policies in Africa. Although often still willing to offer emergency humanitarian aid, and occasionally taking military action to facilitate such missions, the international community increasingly fails to address the root causes of the continent's crises. The implicit message being received is that outsiders are prepared to assist, but the primary responsibility for solving Africa's problems belongs to Africans themselves.

It is in this context that the IGADD initiative regarding Sudan should be assessed.



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The North-South Divide

It is ironic that the civil war that has raged intermittently for nearly four decades should be the result of the seemingly promising status of Sudan (once confidently regarded as the future "breadbasket of the Middle East") as a microcosm of Africa and a bridge between that continent and the Middle East.

Geographically the largest country in Africa (some 967,500 square miles), Sudan is rich in natural resources, with extensive tracts of land suitable for agriculture, an adequate (although unevenly distributed) water supply, large herds of cattle, camels, sheep, and goats, a wide variety of mineral deposits, and oil reserves in commercial quantities. The economically important White Nile and Blue Nile tributaries enter Sudan from Uganda and Ethiopia respectively, merging near Khartoum to become the Nile River, which continues northward to the Egyptian border and ultimately the Mediterranean.

In the 1970s, during a decade-long interlude of peace, it was envisaged that Sudan, being both Arab and African and possessing significant agricultural potential, would provide an ideal context for international cooperation that would mobilize Arab financial capital and Western technology to produce badly needed food for the region. The Arab Authority for Agricultural Investment and Development established its headquarters in Khartoum, intent on making the country a prototype for Arab investment. In cooperation with Egypt, Sudan embarked on the implementation of the mammoth Jonglei Canal that would retrieve the waters of the swampy Sudd region in the south, now lost through evaporation, and make them available for irrigation schemes in the north and Egypt. At the same time, Chevron discovered oil in commercial quantities, mostly in the south, and plans were made to exploit the finds. The resumption of the civil war in 1983 was due in part to controversies over these development projects, which in turn were brought to a standstill by the renewed fighting, a turn of events that has relegated Sudan to the ranks of the world's most impoverished countries.

The country's racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversities are most often categorized in terms of north and south. The north (making up two-thirds of the country in area and population) is inhabited by indigenous tribal groups, some of whom intermarried with incoming Arab traders and produced a genetically mixed African-Arab racial and cultural identity. In many ways, the northern Sudanese resemble the various black ethnic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. (Indeed, Sudan derives its name from the Arabic phrase *Bilad al-Sudan*—"Land of the Blacks.")

In Sudan (unlike the situation in some of the continent's other heavily Muslim countries where the people identify themselves as Africans or in indigenous terms despite their religious affiliation), there is a close intertwining among Islam, the Arabic language, and Arabism as a combined ethnic, cultural, and nationalist concept. Most northern Sudanese are Muslims who tend

to see themselves simply as Arabs despite the visible African element in their skin color, physical features, and cultural characteristics. (There are some non-Arabized communities in the north, which have been partially assimilated as a result of their conversion to Islam and adoption of Arabic as the language of communication with other groups.)

In the south (which makes up one-third of the country in terms of area and population, and is largely Christian and animist in religious composition), the African racial and cultural identity has not been assimilated into Arabism and Islam. As long ago as the era of the slave trade, incursions from the north met with strong resistance.

Colonial-Era "Apartheid"

At the end of the nineteenth century, the creation of a British-dominated Anglo-Egyptian "condominium" ended 13 years of Sudanese self-rule (see "Sudan's Political History in Brief" by J. Coleman Kitchen, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 100, July 1989) and set in motion a sequence of events that deepened the alienation between north and south, setting the stage for the later civil war. Whereas the British recognized and respected the north's Arab-Islamic identity, they viewed the south as pagan and primitive, requiring protection but little or no development. Christian missionaries, excluded from the north, were licensed and encouraged in the south to play a "civilizing" role. The southern region was legally classified as "Closed Districts," and north-south contact was regulated and severely restricted.

While the British colonial administrators invested considerably in the political, economic, social, and cultural development of the north, the southern third of the country remained isolated and undeveloped. Colonial rule in the south had few aspirations beyond the

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establishment and maintenance of law and order. The separate administration of the north and the south left open the option that the south might eventually be annexed to one of the East African colonies or become an independent state.

In 1947, only nine years before independence, the British suddenly reversed the policy of separate development but had neither the time nor the political will to put in place constitutional arrangements that might have ensured protection for the south in a united Sudan.

In 1953, the National Unionist Party (whose platform called for unity with Egypt) won a majority of parliamentary seats in preindependence elections. After becoming prime minister in January 1954, Ismail al-Azhari shifted his party's stand to a call for full independence. So wide was the gap between north and south that when "Sudanization" of the administration and civil service came in 1955 as part of the transition to independence, only 4 junior positions out of the 800 posts previously held by colonial administrators went to the south. Southern fear of possible postindependence northern domination triggered a mutiny in August 1955 that began with a battalion, soon spread throughout the south, and was eventually contained only because of the intervention of the departing British governor general, who promised justice for the rebels and was still trusted.

Independence and Rebellion

The country's two regions were able to agree on an independence date of January 1, 1956, with the understanding that the south's call for a federal relationship with the north would be given full consideration. This never happened. Instead, the north tried to assimilate the south through Arabization and Islamization. The south perceived such assimilation and the dominating role of the north as tantamount to replacing British colonialism with internal Arab "colonialism." As a consequence, the unrest there developed into an armed struggle for secession (or at least self-determination) whose first phase was to last for nearly two decades.

The political impasse created by the situation in the south prompted the military to take over in November 1958, less than three years after independence, with the aim of pursuing Arabization and Islamization of the south more vigorously, unhampered by parliamentary democracy. The military's ruthlessness caused the southern conflict to escalate in the 1960s into a full-fledged civil war, whose effect on the political situation led to the popular uprising that brought about the end of the military regime in 1964.

The new interim government temporarily relaxed the oppressive policies toward the south, declaring a general amnesty in the region and organizing a March 1965 roundtable conference that brought together representatives from the north and south. The conference rejected separation or self-determination but established a "12 Man Committee" to formulate an appropriate constitutional arrangement for reconciling

southern demands with the preservation of national unity. The committee suggested regional autonomy for the south.

The procedures of the restored parliamentary democracy got under way before the committee's recommendations could be implemented by the interim government. After the June 1965 election, the traditional political parties assumed control and resumed the assimilation policies with a vengeance. The level of political instability rose as violence resumed and intensified.

In May 1969, a new military junta, led by Colonel Jafar al-Numeri, seized power in alliance with the Communist Party, which supported autonomy for the south (provided the region first accepted socialism, a condition southerners resisted). After displaying an ambivalent attitude toward the rebels, Numeri's regime negotiated with them, eventually signing the 1972 Addis Ababa accords, which, in accordance with the recommendations of the "12 Man Committee", granted the south regional autonomy with a democratic parliamentary system.

The SPLM/SPLA

Unfortunately, the 1972 peace agreement was not the end of the story. The Numeri regime was under pressure from conservative and radical Islamic elements, especially the sectarian parties and al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood), a radical rightist religious group, with which Numeri eventually entered into an uneasy alliance. He also underwent a personal conversion, becoming a devout Muslim. In an effort to outflank the sectarian opposition leaders and also to end the incongruity between the south's liberal democratic structures and his authoritarian presidential system, Numeri gradually eroded the south's autonomy, moving relentlessly toward imposing Islamic law (Sharia) and establishing an Islamic state. In 1983, he unilaterally abrogated the Addis Ababa accords by dividing the south into three smaller regions and ordering the transfer of southern troops to the north.

The Khartoum regime's various actions triggered the formation of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its military wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), both under the leadership of John Garang de Mabior, a former colonel in the Sudanese army. To the surprise of many observers, the declared objective of the movement was not secession but the creation of a new, secular, democratic, and pluralistic Sudan.

In April 1985, a popular uprising largely fueled by the military situation in the south led to Numeri's overthrow in a military coup that ushered in a transition to civilian rule. Most northerners expected the SPLM/SPLA to put down their arms and ride the democratic wave. But the movement seemed genuinely committed to the restructuring of power toward the creation of a new Sudan, an idea viewed as even more threatening to the Arab-Islamic establishment of the north than secession.

After Numeri's overthrow, the Muslim Brotherhood reorganized itself into a broader-based political party, the National Islamic Front (NIF), which won the third largest number of seats in the 1986 parliamentary elections. The NIF's Islamic national agenda was significantly reinforced when Brigadier General (later Lieutenant General) Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir, in alliance with the NIF, seized power on June 30, 1989, in the name of the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation.

The SPLM/SPLA condemned the coup as an Islamist move engineered by the NIF, but agreed to peace talks. The first talks held in Addis Ababa shortly after the coup proved fruitless. The government then proceeded in September 1989 to convene a "National Dialogue Conference on Peace Issues" in Khartoum as an alternative to dialogue with the SPLM (although it extended a rhetorical invitation to the rebels). The principal recommendation of the conference was adoption of a federal system. The al-Bashir regime endorsed the conference recommendations. The SPLM/SPLA did not attend the conference but nonetheless acknowledged the proposals, along with suggestions from other sources, as useful bases for constitutional talks. Neither the conference nor any of several talks subsequently sponsored by various mediators over the ensuing half-decade, however, have succeeded in ending the fighting. As of early 1995, the southern conflict represents a deepening crisis of national identity, with nearly one and a half million people killed, 4 million internally displaced, and almost half a million forced into neighboring countries as refugees.

New Regional and Global Factors

The prospects for a just and lasting peace in Sudan have been significantly influenced by recent regional and global changes in ideologically based power structures and related processes. The initial rise of the SPLM/SPLA as a force that seriously challenged the Arab-Islamic establishment was enhanced by help from Ethiopia (then under Mengistu Haile Mariam's Marxist regime), which had the strongest army in the region. For the first time, the notion of a takeover of the country by non-Arabs did not seem fanciful. This perceived threat drove the Arab-Muslim north into a hysteria that largely accounts for the extremist reaction of the National Islamic Front and its rise to power through the military.

The May 1991 collapse of the Mengistu regime (see "The Transition in Ethiopia" by Terrence Lyons, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 127, August 1991) deprived the SPLM/SPLA of its key source of support. Meanwhile, representatives of Western aid agencies, many of whom were ardently anti-Marxist and therefore worried by the SPLM/SPLA's ties with Mengistu, put pressure on elements within the movement to bring about changes in its leadership, management style, and objectives, calling for a greater emphasis on democracy and respect for human rights. These foreign actors considered the SPLM/SPLA's stated goal of restructuring the country

into a more pluralistic and equitable "new Sudan" to be unattainable, and found the idea of southern secession more understandable.

These influences may have helped encourage elements within the SPLM/SPLA to attempt to oust Garang as leader in 1991. Although they did not succeed, their effort ushered in a "creeping revolt" that eventually divided the movement into irreconcilable factions—Garang's SPLM/SPLA-Mainstream and SPLA-United, initially led by Riek Machar and Lam Akol.

SPLA-United itself has proved vulnerable to splintering. Riek Machar dismissed Lam, alleging cooperation with Khartoum. Lam responded by declaring his own breakaway faction. Other dismissals and breakaways followed. While the various dissidents all affirm commitment to separation from the north, and the group under Riek Machar has in fact renamed itself the Southern Sudan Independence Movement, their de facto top priority has been opposing Garang as the leader of the SPLM/SPLA. Toward that end, paradoxically, they have in varying forms and degrees allied themselves with the government, sometimes even fighting side by side with Khartoum's forces against SPLM/SPLA Mainstream. As a result, the dissidents enjoy very little popularity or credibility in comparison to Garang and his SPLM/SPLA-Mainstream.

These national and regional dynamics, along with the rise of fundamentalism throughout the Muslim world, helped strengthen the Islamic regime in Khartoum. With funding and training from Iran and weapons from China and South Africa (before the end of apartheid), the regime was able to mobilize the north's material and human resources for a holy war against what it regarded as the infidels in the south. As the government regained control of the major towns in the south, the SPLM/SPLA-Mainstream, bedeviled both by the government army and by the cooperation of some rebel factions with the al-Bashir regime, was forced to retreat and restructure itself from a conventional force back into a guerrilla movement.

The al-Bashir government has become increasingly ambitious in its objectives for the country. Its earlier inclination toward accommodating the south through a scheme of national decentralization or even a partitioning of the country has been replaced by a determination to implement its Islamic agenda throughout the country, with only minor regional concessions for the non-Muslim south. Meanwhile, the international community stands poised between condemning the regime's Islamic extremism (in particular what the West perceives as Khartoum's role in promoting terrorism) and trying to build bridges of understanding and cooperation (partly out of a desire to avoid being labeled anti-Islamic).

Why Previous Mediation Attempts Failed

Anyone seeking to advance the cause of peace in Sudan must understand the dynamics of past negotiations. A recurring pattern has been for the country's contending factions to approach mediated talks more as a public

relations exercise than a genuine attempt to reach a settlement. None of the elements involved wants to be perceived as a warmonger not interested in peace. So, whenever a third party suggests mediation, the initial response is nearly always positive. But when the talks start, it soon becomes obvious that the positions of the parties are far apart and they have no intention of compromising.

Another shortcoming has been that the primary focus of the outside mediator was usually on bringing about talks *per se* rather than on getting deeply involved in the issues dividing the combatants. The mediator has implicitly assumed that once the parties begin to talk, they will identify the issues, clarify their positions, and eventually compromise. In reality, it turns out that the process falls apart once the key issues are raised: the commitments on both sides emerge as irreconcilable, the mediator remains unwilling to get involved in discussing substantive issues, and the talks inevitably fail.

How the IGADD Initiative Differs

After preliminary talks in Kampala in November 1993 and in Nairobi in January 1994, formal negotiations started in Nairobi in March 1994 and were consolidated in the May 1994 meeting, again in Nairobi. It soon became apparent that the IGADD countries had undertaken a daring initiative that went beyond merely fostering talks to addressing the root causes of the conflict. The IGADD mediation committee consisted of two organs: a summit committee of heads of state (Ethiopia's President Meles Zenawi, Eritrea's President Issaias Afewerki, Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi [as chairman], and Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni) and a standing committee composed of their ministers.

The premise of the IGADD mediators was that the conflict in Sudan is not merely national, because it has repercussions that affect neighboring countries. The leaders of the mediation committee also knew Sudan and its leaders very well. They were therefore dealing with a familiar problem in a familiar context. Rather than settling for just bringing the parties together, they sought to dig deeper into the problem, its root causes, and ways in which it might substantively be resolved.

The Declaration of Principles (DOP), developed by mediators from the stated positions of the parties and presented at the May 1994 meeting of the standing committee of ministers, became the key component of the peace process. The DOP sought to reconcile the competing perspectives of the conflict. Bearing in mind that the war had devastated Sudan for nearly four decades and that the nation had become severely polarized, the IGADD mediators decided that no option should be excluded from consideration. And so, without prejudging the ultimate outcome, they sought to uphold the right of self-determination as an inalienable right guaranteed by international law to any people whose particular circumstances justify its application. At the same time, the DOP advocated giving national unity high priority.

National unity was stipulated as requiring the creation of conditions of governance that ensure a national consensus based on mutual satisfaction and support. It was therefore considered prudent to agree on an interim period during which conditions for unity would be created and tested. Among these conditions would be separation of religion and the state (secularism), a system of government based on multiparty democracy, respect for fundamental human rights, and a large measure of decentralization through a loose federation or a confederacy. The interim period was to be long enough to allow time for creating those conditions and testing them, but not so long as to create complacency and lethargy on the part of the controlling authorities. After the interim period, the people of the south (and other areas that feel equally disadvantaged and have also taken up arms) would be asked to decide by referendum whether to continue the unity arrangement or adopt alternative arrangements (with secession as an option).

The SPLM/SPLA factions accepted the Declaration of Principles. The Khartoum government initially resisted it, but was eventually persuaded by the mediators to discuss the principles and register any objections they had on specific points. The most divisive issues turned out to be the right of self-determination and the proposed separation between religion and the state. At first, the problem appeared to be one of semantics, with the government objecting to the terms "secularism" and "self-determination" but seemingly receptive to such alternative formulations as the neutrality of religion on matters of state and the right of the people of the south to determine their destiny through a referendum. The SPLM/SPLA factions, on the other hand, wanted to keep the original DOP language, fearing that the government was seeking to divert attention from the substance through an artful use of words. Indeed, it soon became obvious that the government's raising of semantic concerns was merely an evasive tactic and that in fact a fundamental difference on substance existed between the two sides. The May 1994 meeting adjourned on the understanding that the parties would consider these main issues and return to the next session with a more definitive response.

The follow-up session, convened in July 1994 in Nairobi, witnessed a more dramatic manifestation of polarization, with both parties uncompromisingly holding to their stated positions. The SPLM/SPLA factions insisted on secularism and the right of self-determination. Khartoum appointed a new head for its delegation—Dr. Ghazi Salah al-Din Atabani, a hard-line member of the National Islamic Front, well known both for his ideological commitment and his bluntness of expression. Under his leadership, the government delegation restated its position with ideological fervor, emphasizing several major points: (1) Secularism was totally out of the question. For the government, commitment to Sharia (Islamic) law was part of a religious and moral obligation to pursue a mission—interrupted by colonialism—of promoting Islam not only throughout Sudan but also in the rest of Africa, in order to save the continent from the

ills of lingering Western influence. (2) Self-determination was a ploy for partitioning the country and therefore unacceptable as a matter of principle. The regime had inherited the country within the present geographical borders and owed it to past and future generations to preserve it and pass it on as such. (3) The government objected to the format of the negotiations and preferred shuttle diplomacy to the face-to-face sessions adopted by the mediators. (4) The government had initiated its own internal peace process and would surprise the world in the near future with news about the internal achievement of peace.

In the aftermath of this dramatic display of intransigence, the chairman of the mediation committee, Kenya's President Moi, convened in September 1994 a meeting of the committee's heads of state together with Sudan's President al-Bashir and the leaders of the SPLM/SPLA factions in the hope of rescuing the talks. Speaking before the standing committee, al-Bashir reaffirmed the position of his spokesman, and the SPLM/SPLA leadership also restated their previous position.

At this point the IGADD initiative seemed to have come to a dead end. However, recognizing that the conflict in Sudan might have major implications for the region as a whole if it were not resolved, the mediation committee decided to remain engaged in the peace process and to develop a strategy based on the objective facts of the situation and the need for collaboration between the IGADD committee on the one hand and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the international community, led by the United Nations, on the other. This was the gist of the statement made by the committee after its most recent meeting with the parties on January 4, 1995.

What Next?

Recent developments in the region, in particular the deterioration in bilateral relations between Sudan and two members of the IGADD mediation committee, Eritrea and Uganda (relations with Ethiopia and Kenya being more normal, if not entirely cordial), have made matters more complicated and threaten to undermine the effectiveness of the regional initiative. In both of these new bilateral disputes, each side has made incriminating allegations about subversive activities on the other's part, including recruiting, training, and the deployment of "terrorists" or "opposition forces" in border areas. Although Khartoum suspects all four committee members of sympathy for the south, Ethiopia and Kenya appear to have maintained postures more acceptable to Khartoum than those of Eritrea and Uganda.

These events raise a number of questions that must be confronted head-on and realistically addressed. Does the IGADD initiative still have a chance of bringing about a negotiated peace or should it be declared a failure? Have the countries now involved in disputes of their own with Sudan lost credibility as mediators? Should they forgo their roles on the mediation committee? If so, which

countries should replace them? Should IGADD's peace efforts be supplemented by initiatives on the part of other regional groups such as the Organization of African Unity or the Arab League?

A pessimistic response to these questions would invite a search for alternative avenues and actors, leaving the Sudanese parties free to pursue their longtime tactic (or perhaps even strategy) of "talk about talks" for public relations purposes, without progress toward peace. A more promising response would be to seek regional and international support for the IGADD initiative while recognizing its strengths and weaknesses and creatively seeking ways of compensating for its shortcomings.

If the latter approach is followed, then some of the problems facing the IGADD initiative could turn out to have a positive side. With regard to the issue of the credibility of Eritrea and Uganda as mediators, for instance, the fact that these countries are now themselves in low-intensity conflicts with Sudan underscores the interconnectedness of the conflicts in the region. Members of the IGADD mediation committee have made it clear from the start that they do not see themselves as detached and disinterested third parties. Quite the contrary. They view the Sudanese conflict as containing the seeds of a potentially deadly regional contagion. The unfolding bilateral problems with Sudan underscore this realization and point to the danger of far greater regionwide explosions. With these implications openly acknowledged, both the issues at stake and the urgency of finding a mutually agreeable resolution should become even more compelling.

Because the IGADD initiative was conceived and planned at the subregional level to involve actors with insight into the situation and a vested interest in the outcome, altering the composition of the mediation team would undermine its very foundation. However, the structural weakness and shortcomings of the initiative should be acknowledged and addressed.

Although Eritrea and Uganda will continue to play a major role in the process, both as mediators and parties to aspects of the region's conflicts, Ethiopia and Kenya will remain the pivotal actors in the mediation process, if only because they are more acceptable to Khartoum and can therefore act as bridge-builders. Through their good offices, they can also play an active role in soliciting the contribution of other actors in the OAU, the Arab League, and the international community at large. They have already started to do this by keeping in close contact with OAU Secretary General Salim Ahmed Salim, individual African leaders, and President Clinton's special envoy on the Sudan, Ambassador Melissa Wells, all of whom have been strong supporters of the IGADD process. A concerted effort toward an even more comprehensive mobilization of international support can only strengthen the chances for peace.

Also necessary is a strategy to force the Sudanese factions to move beyond diplomatic grandstanding and take seriously the need for peace. As long as one party is too strong or too weak, neither is likely to be motivated to negotiate in good faith. Thus, a balance of power

should be encouraged that makes the war obviously unwinnable by either side. A mutually hurting stalemate (along with a well-targeted use of sticks and carrots by the outside world) is the best incentive for a viable settlement. Ultimately, of course, as the IGADD committee has noted, the responsibility for ending the war must fall on the Sudanese people themselves. But the Sudanese are limited in their capacity to make peace. They need help.

In sum, although the breakdown of the talks in July and September 1994 and the subsequent deterioration of relations between Sudan and some members of the IGADD committee constitute a setback in the peace process, sufficient progress has been made to warrant increased support for the process: (1) The divisive issues and the positions of the parties on those issues have been clearly identified. (2) The regional mediators have manifested their willingness to be engaged not as disinterested third parties but as neighbors with a stake in the outcome. (3) While assuming a major responsibility for the peace process, the IGADD mediators have declared their intention to collaborate with the international community in discharging this obligation.

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