

Sudan: The Prospects for “National Dialogue”

Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°108

Nairobi/Brussels, 11 March 2015

I. Overview

Prospects for an inclusive national dialogue President Omar al-Bashir promised in January 2014 are fading, making a soft-landing end to Sudan’s crises more doubtful. Sceptics who warned that the ruling party was unwilling and unable to make needed concessions have been vindicated. Peacemaking in Darfur and the Two Areas (Blue Nile and South Kordofan) and potential merging of these negotiations with the national dialogue were dealt a blow with suspension of African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP)-mediated “parallel” talks in Addis Ababa in December. A separate German-backed initiative has elicited a more unified and constructive approach from the armed and unarmed opposition, but no breakthrough yet. The government still holds many cards – including formidable means of coercion – and has little sympathy for the increasingly unified demand of the armed and political opposition for a really inclusive process and true power sharing. Unless both sides give ground, a continuation of intense war and humanitarian crises is inevitable.

The offer of national dialogue was prompted by a series of events – partly due to unaddressed consequences of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and South Sudan’s 2011 independence – including large, violently repressed nationwide September 2013 protests in Khartoum and other cities, followed by a costly, unsuccessful and unpopular military campaign in South Kordofan. But almost as soon as the government’s offer of dialogue was announced, there was a crackdown on opposition activists and the media. The recently-formed paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) reportedly were deployed in Khartoum to quell protests. The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), alongside the RSF, have since renewed their “hot dry season” campaign against the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) rebel coalition in the southern peripheries and Darfur.

Opportunism and divisions within the civilian and armed opposition have given the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) a respite. While other parties refused to participate in or withdrew from the preparatory National Dialogue Committee (NDC), some Islamist, traditional and smaller parties remained, looking to maximise their share of government posts in return for lending credibility to planned April elections that other major parties will boycott, further polarising the country. The December 2014 “Sudan Call”, which reflected a growing unity of demands from the political opposition, civil society and armed groups, came too late to influence the NDC’s discussion in August of the parameters for the dialogue and was immediately rejected by the government. However, the opposition’s more sophisticated approach at sub-

sequent meetings in Berlin has improved prospects for an inclusive preparatory meeting before the election.

The NCP has reason to believe Sudan’s vulnerable regional and wider international position has improved. The International Criminal Court (ICC) decision to “suspend” its Darfur work gives the president more confidence he will not be prosecuted. Pressure from anti-Muslim Brotherhood Arab and Gulf states has eased somewhat. Meanwhile, the civil war in South Sudan has distracted the SRF, an increase in gold exports has relieved economic pressure, and the steep drop in oil prices has been weathered, because Sudan now imports much of its fuel, and its substantial income from oil transport fees is fixed. But this betterment of the government’s political and military position is fragile and reversible; fundamental, dangerous weaknesses remain.

As Crisis Group has argued in previous reports, a peaceful, political solution through an inclusive national dialogue would be a vital step toward ending the violent protests at the centre and wars in the periphery that could otherwise lead to Sudan’s further fragmentation. The NCP, and the military-security apparatus in particular, are unlikely to submit to another “CPA” process requiring them to share power in Khartoum with a still-armed opposition, but might accommodate greater regional administrative autonomy if they can continue to dominate the centre.

Western donors’ influence is much reduced, and the responsibilities for mediating the fighting, encouraging recommitment to inclusive dialogue and bearing the burden and cost of instability now mostly fall to the AU (especially the AUHIP, which is mandated to mediate the proposed national dialogue); immediate African neighbours; Arab friends (collectively the Gulf Cooperation Council); and China, given its huge investments. These actors could exert greater and coordinated influence for remedial actions that would improve the chances for more talk and less war by:

- ❑ pressing the opposition and government to participate in an inclusive preparatory meeting for the national dialogue, hosted and mediated by the AUHIP prior to the national elections, to forge clear terms of reference and common positions to which all parties are fully committed;
- ❑ urging the AU Technical Assessment Mission to consider the impact an AU observation mission to a controversial election might have on the AUHIP’s mandate in the national dialogue process;
- ❑ encouraging opposition parties and civil society to develop further a common position on the national dialogue through trusted third-country facilitation (eg, the German-sponsored initiative);
- ❑ pushing the government and opposition to re-engage with the AUHIP’s strategy for a parallel and loosely synchronised process of talks on the Two Areas and Darfur; and
- ❑ consideration by China of how its economic investments can better address regional inequalities that are fuelling continued wars.

II. The Leap Falls Short

On 27 January 2014, President Bashir delivered a wide-ranging speech calling for a “great leap”, leading to the political and economic “renaissance” of the country through a national dialogue – a decades-long demand of the legal civilian opposition, armed groups and increasingly dissenting voices within the regime, as well as of the international community.¹ This followed a major government reshuffle in November 2013, a reaction to widespread, brutally suppressed protests sparked by economic hardship and the lifting of fuel subsidies in September that arguably were the largest civil unrest since the “bloodless” *intifada* in 1985.²

Some Sudanese intellectuals also saw the apparent softening of the government position in the context of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi’s ouster.³ Others perceived the influence of “pragmatists”, like Presidential Assistant Ibrahim Ghandour, promoted during the cabinet reshuffle, and the demotion of “hardline Islamists”, such as former Presidential Assistant Nafie Ali Nafie and Vice President Ali Osman Taha. The reshuffle was likewise seen as generational change within the NCP.⁴ Yet, the elevation of close military allies to senior political posts did not augur well for a reform agenda.⁵

On 6 April 2014, the government convened a roundtable on the proposed national dialogue that, attended by 83 political figures and representatives of 90 political parties, appeared inclusive, though many of the parties were known to be government leaning.⁶ The roundtable’s most important output was the establishment of the National Dialogue Committee (NDC).⁷ Another notable concession was the right for

¹ “Nida’a alwathba khatab alraees Omer al-Bashir ela alumma alsudaniyah kamilan video” [“Leap appeal – Sudan President Bashir full speech to the Sudanese nation video”], *Sudan Today* (online), 28 January 2014.

² Hassan Ishag, “Moroor A’am ala habat September: Dema’a alshohada’a ala awarg almajhool” [“September uprising one year on: victims still await justice”], *Alrakoba*, 24 September 2014.

³ Crisis Group interviews, political party leaders, April-May 2014.

⁴ Crisis group email correspondence, Sudanese political commentator, 9 January 2015.

⁵ The moderate-hardliner distinction may be misleading; the clear winner was the president’s close military ally (and widely-touted successor) Major General Bakri Hassan Saleh, who replaced Taha. Abdelrahim Mohamed Hussein also kept his job as defence minister, despite defeats against the SRF in 2013. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, December 2013. Taha was – with John Garang – the CPA’s co-architect, while Nafie signed the 28 June 2011 framework agreement with the SRF, subsequently overruled by Bashir at the demand of military hardliners. A document, whose authenticity the government denies and which Crisis Group cannot independently verify, contains minutes alleged to be of an August 2014 military and security committee session. It suggests the government was never serious about dialogue or peace talks and mentions a 30 million Sudanese pound payment (\$5.27 million) to the PCP in an allusion to the reconciliation with Hassan al-Turabi (see below). It also refers to a perception that international mediators, including Thabo Mbeki and UN envoy Haile Menkerios, are on the government’s side and being duped. “New and authoritative translation into English of minutes for August 31 meeting of the most senior military and security officials in the Khartoum regime”, Sudan Research, Analysis, and Advocacy (sundanreeves.org), 22 October 2014.

⁶ Crisis Group interview, dissident NUP leader, May 2014.

⁷ The NDC was also known as the “7+7” committee, because it initially included seven opposition and seven government or government-leaning parties, which were respectively: Sadiq al-Mahdi’s NUP, Turabi’s PCP and Ghazi’s Reform Now Party, as well as the Federal Truth Party, Arab Nasserist Party, Eastern Democratic Platform Party and Working Forces Organisation; and the NCP, two factions of the divided Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), a splinter branch of Umma (Ahmed Babiker Nahar’s Umma-Federal, disgruntled Darfur NUP members), the National Unity party and

parties to organise rallies (albeit with prior authorisation). But rather than accepting an increase in freedoms alongside the dialogue, the government sharply reduced political space.⁸ In May, the RSF was deployed in and around the capital, undermining the promises for an environment conducive to dialogue.⁹ The imprisonment of National Umma Party (NUP) leader Sadiq al-Mahdi on 17 May (he was released on 15 June), the Sudanese Congress Party (SCoP) head Ibrahim al-Sheikh in June and the NUP deputy chairperson, Mariam al-Mahdi (Sadiq al-Mahdi’s daughter), in August further exposed the limits of the earlier commitments.¹⁰

The opposition’s representation on the NDC was weakened when the NUP suspended participation following Sadiq al-Mahdi’s arrest and imprisonment.¹¹ With the NUP gone, the NDC’s opposition contingent was reduced to little more than Hassan al-Turabi’s Popular Congress Party (PCP).¹² In March, Turabi had made his first public appearance with Bashir since 1999. Though they always maintained back-channel contacts, their public reconciliation was a calculated act of political reciprocity.¹³ In July, Islamic Movement Secretary General al-Zubair Ahmad al-Hassan publicly linked a successful dialogue to the potential for a broad alliance among Sudan’s Islamists that would repair some of the NCP’s historic fractures.¹⁴

Faced with possible rapprochement between long-divided Islamists and no-longer part of the NDC, the NUP signed the Paris Declaration with the SRF on 8 August.¹⁵

two former rebel movements, the Beja Congress (signatory of the 2006 East Sudan Peace Agreement) and the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM, signatory of the 2011 Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, DDPD).

⁸ “Sudan’s Bashir guarantees freedom of activities for all political parties”, *Sudan Tribune*, 15 April 2014; “Sudan bans meetings of political parties”, Al Jazeera, 15 April 2014. Crisis Group interviews, opposition officials, August, September 2014.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Darfur rebel group leader, May 2014. For more on formation of the RSF, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°223, *Sudan and South Sudan’s Merging Conflicts*, 29 January 2015, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ Their arrests were officially linked to their criticism of RSF violence in Darfur and South Kordofan; others note the NUP leader’s links with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt and alleged support to the September 2013 protests. Crisis Group interview, August 2014.

¹¹ Sadiq al-Mahdi (as well as Hassan al-Turabi) was one of the few political leaders who initially answered the president’s call for dialogue without preconditions; this caused a rift within the already disjointed NUP, culminating in the removal of its secretary general, Ibrahim al-Amin. NUP representative Youssef Hassan continued to participate in spite of the boycott.

¹² Turabi was the former chief ideologue of the NCP (and National Islamic Front) and its informal leader before he was manoeuvred out by Bashir. Since his ouster and creation of the PCP, he has criticised NCP security hardliners and called for the regime’s overthrow. The Reform Now Party of Ghazi Salaheddin, a recent NCP defector and Islamist “reformer”, briefly suspended participation in solidarity with the NUP, resumed on 22 August, stating that the roadmap met opposition demands, and suspended again on 20 January 2015.

¹³ It was reportedly at Turabi’s demand that veteran but rival Islamist figures (including Taha) were removed during the November 2013 reshuffle as a condition for his reconciliation with Bashir. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, September–October 2014.

¹⁴ “National Dialogue would reunite Sudan’s Islamic forces”, *Sudan Tribune*, 18 July 2014. Crisis Group interviews, August 2014. Turabi may also attract Darfur Islamists, largely represented by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebel group.

¹⁵ In November 2011, rebel movements fighting in the Two Areas and Darfur united for the first time under the banner of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF): Sudan People’s Liberation Movement–North (SPLM-N), and three “Darfur” movements; the JEM and the two Sudan Liberation Army factions (SLA-MM led by Minni Minawi) and SLA-AW (led by Abdelwahid Mohammed Ahmed

In it the NUP reaffirmed it would boycott elections unless “held under a transitional government”, and the SRF reaffirmed commitment to Sudan’s unity and readiness for cessation of hostilities.¹⁶ This did much to rescue Sadiq al-Mahdi’s reputation: his initial eagerness to accept unconditionally the government’s dialogue call had gained him little leverage with the regime but trenchant criticism within his party.¹⁷

It was not until early August that the NDC finally laid out parameters for the proposed discussions.¹⁸ On 4 September, in an attempt to bridge the growing divides over the dialogue, the Paris Declaration signatories and the NDC – both government and official opposition representatives – signed an Agreement on National Dialogue and Constitutional Processes.¹⁹ This was done under AUHIP facilitation in Addis Ababa, and the AUHIP’s mediation role was reinforced by the AU Peace and Security Council’s 456th meeting communiqué, which endorsed a meeting of all Sudanese parties in Addis Ababa to “discuss relevant process issues” to “pave the way for the National Dialogue”.²⁰ In the meantime, however, separate AUHIP-mediated talks between the government and SRF components (Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) on the Two Areas, Darfur rebels for Darfur) were making little progress, amid significant divisions within and between SRF component groups, which made an inclusive meeting on the dialogue unlikely.

While formally supporting preparations for national dialogue, the government reacted aggressively throughout 2014 to official opposition and civil society rapprochement with the SRF. On 27 September, Bashir warned that al-Mahdi (exiled in Cairo for fear of re-imprisonment) would need to renounce the Paris Declaration before returning to Sudan; in November he vowed to try him. Despite the threat, the SRF and NUP, along with other opposition parties grouped in the National Consensus Forces (NCF) and the Civil Society Initiative, signed in Addis Ababa on 3 December another joint declaration, the “Sudan Call”.²¹ On 6 December, two signatories, the NCF Chairman Farouk Abu Issa and Civil Society Initiative leader Amin Makki Medani, were arrested after returning to Khartoum. By early December, government negotiators had pulled back from concessions regarding the AUHIP plan to synchro-

Nur). For details see Crisis Group Africa Report N°211, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (III): The Limits of Darfur’s Peace Process*, 27 January 2014, pp. 19-20.

¹⁶ “The Paris Declaration”, *Sudan Tribune*, 8 August 2014. The declaration papered over divisions between the signatories resulting from the wariness of the “sectarian” NUP about the SRF’s demands for a secular regime; some SRF also ruled out negotiating with the NCP, eg, the SLA-AW. See Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (III)*, op. cit.

¹⁷ His month’s imprisonment in May helped his rehabilitation; a NUP source noted that, following the declaration, the party “regained the relative confidence of many, not least the youth who had lost all respect for Sadiq”. Crisis Group interview, NUP youth representative, August 2014.

¹⁸ Atta El-Hassan El-Battahani, “National Dialogue in Sudan: Past Experiences and Current Challenges”, Sudan Democracy First Group, August 2014, p. 9.

¹⁹ The agreement included language on “stopping the war” and “basic human rights” as confidence building measures toward an inclusive national dialogue. The government side’s representative was not from the NCP, but the DUP, which likely made the talks easier. The government’s reception of the deal was mixed, but the AUHIP said it obtained President Bashir’s endorsement. Crisis Group interview, AUHIP official, January 2015.

²⁰ “Communique of the 456th meeting of the AU Peace and Security Council on Sudan’s National Dialogue”, *Sudan Tribune*, 15 September 2014.

²¹ “Sudan Call”, 3 December 2014; “The Sudan Call: A Light at the End of the Tunnel?”, Sudan Democracy First Group, 17 December 2015. Civil society – more politicised than the name suggests – was prominent in “Sudan Call”; for views on it, see Theodore Murphy, Jérôme Tubiana, “Civil Society in Darfur: The Missing Peace”, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 2010.

nise local peace negotiations and possibly engage the SRF as whole. This, as well as significant distance between the government and armed opposition positions on other questions, led to the collapse of Darfur talks and an inconclusive result on the Two Areas negotiations.

Turabi’s PCP is now the only major opposition party still participating in the NDC, together with two smaller parties, since two parties headed by former NCP supporters, Reform Now and the Just Peace Forum, withdrew.²² Even before it has formally started, the preparatory process for the national dialogue has become a political battleground, reflecting another deep government-opposition divide. Before formal talks start, much internal discussion is necessary inside both camps to forge clear terms of reference and common positions to which all parties are fully committed.²³ Nevertheless, the Paris Declaration and Sudan Call were important milestones toward opposition unity, which a German-sponsored “track two” initiative furthered – and helped moderate – during a Berlin meeting (24-27 February).²⁴ It remains to be seen whether opposition concessions in the “Berlin Declaration” will bring a more accommodating government response. All parties should now revisit the AU’s September 2014 offer to host a preparatory meeting on the national dialogue prior to the national elections.

III. NCP Consolidating Control

Scepticism about the NCP’s commitment to national dialogue has been fed not only by the machinations within the NDC and apparent closure of political space described above, but also by the government’s determination to hold elections in April 2015 and passage of constitutional amendments that bolster central and presidential power.

A. The Constitution

On 4 January 2015, parliament approved eighteen amendments to the 2005 interim constitution that included expanding the role of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), legalising its de facto command of the RSF since 2013, and allowing it and the police to create their own courts. They also incorporated the 2011 Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD) into the constitution, institutionalising the key government condition that the DDPD (not signed by the SRF’s Darfur factions) serve as the framework for talks with Darfur rebels; and gave the president powers to appoint state governors (previously chosen by election).²⁵

²² “Sudan opposition to boycott National Dialogue”, Al Jazeera, 21 January 2015. Reform Now is headed by a former presidential adviser, Dr Ghazi Salaheddin, and Just Peace Forum by Tayeb Mustafa, President Bashir’s uncle.

²³ Crisis Group interview, Sudan activist, Nairobi, 2 February 2015.

²⁴ “The Sudan Call Forces Position on Addis Ababa Preparatory Meeting” (“Berlin Declaration”), no date. The Sudan government gave its tacit blessing to the German initiative; senior government officials were reportedly present in Berlin for back-channel discussions.

²⁵ “Al-Barlman yoger t’adeelat dostoriyah tasmah le alra’ees beta’yeen alwolah wa tohawal ‘alamn’ le gooaat Nizamiyah” [“The parliament approves constitutional amendments to allow the president to appoint governors and transform ‘NISS’ to regular force”], *Sudan Tribune*, 4 January 2015. Most elected governors in conflict-affected areas have already been replaced: none of the three Kordofan and only one of the five Darfur state governors were elected; Blue Nile (elected) Governor Malik

The overall result is the consolidation of a (re-)centralised presidency and establishment of an armed force under the NISS wholly separate from the military command and, crucially, not ideologically Islamist-orientated.²⁶ At the same time, the possibility to appoint governors from outside their region might enable the president to better manage intra-NCP conflicts that have complicated local governance, especially in South Kordofan and Darfur.²⁷

B. *The Election*

Despite earlier claims he would not stand, Bashir is the NCP presidential candidate.²⁸ The government is determined to hold elections in April; mainstream opposition parties – some co-opted by the government after South Sudan’s independence – plan to boycott, though some still hope for a postponement.²⁹ The controversial 2010 census still stands, and the National Election Commission (NEC) is widely perceived as NCP-dominated.³⁰ Opposition leaders say they were not sufficiently consulted on the June 2014 amendments to the electoral laws, and they argue that these benefit the main political parties and exclude minority groups.³¹ Some of these amendments appear to empower smaller parties, probably in an attempt by the NCP to obtain their electoral support. For example, parliament increased the number of seats to be determined by proportional representation from 40 to 50 per cent, did away with the 4 per cent vote threshold for representation in the assembly and changed the list from state-based (winner takes all) to national, so smaller parties might get some seats.

Demonstrating its dominance and eager to gain support for the elections, the government announced on 7 January that it would not field candidates in 30 per cent of the seats to make way for minority parties. A number of breakaway party factions, some representing regional constituencies, will contest these seats, which they would otherwise be unlikely to win.³² The government held out further incentives,

Agar was dismissed when he rebelled in 2011. The current West Darfur governor, a Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM) member, was appointed after his rebel movement signed the DDPD in July 2011. Governors were also appointed by the president before 2010.

²⁶ In November 2012, NISS made a pre-emptive strike against an alleged coup, arresting several well-known “Islamist” army officers and its former chief, Salah Abdallah “Gosh”. Crisis Group Africa Report N°194, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012, pp. 10, 12.

²⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (III)*, op. cit., pp. 6, 18; Magdi el-Gizouli “Sudan: NCP adds fresh zibala’ to its house of mud”, African Arguments (www.Africanarguments.org), 11 November 2014.

²⁸ In 2011, following the “Arab Spring” revolt in Egypt, the NCP declared that Bashir would not contest the 2015 elections. Even as late as mid-October 2014, a week before the NCP general convention, senior party insider Nafie Ali Nafie noted internal divisions on his candidacy, with some groups pushing for a different nominee. “Sudan: NCP figure reveals division over candidacy of Bashir”, Radio Tamazuj, 14 October 2014.

²⁹ The NUP and those still part of the National Consensus Forces (NCF) Coalition will boycott. “Sudanese opposition starts ‘Leave!’ campaign”, Radio Dabanga, 3 February 2015. Regime officials have previously countenanced postponement of elections. Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese and international observers, August-December 2014; “Presidential aide hints at possible postponement of Sudan elections”, *Sudan Tribune*, 26 October 2014.

³⁰ The NEC is chaired by an NCP official and dominated by politicians close to it.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, NCF officials and civil society figures, August 2014. “Sudan’s 2015 elections: an ominous déjà vu?”, Sudan Democracy First Group, 6 May 2014.

³² These include break-off factions of major parties, some representing distinct regional groupings, eg, Jalal Yusuf al-Digeir’s DUP (supported by the Hindiyya, a minority Sufi sect close to the Khat-

stating that only parties participating in the elections can be included in the next government.

In addition to the lack of representation of boycotting parties, the elections may also result in defeats for former rebels, including Darfuris in the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM) who were co-opted through the DDPD and former SPLM-N members still in the government. This could deepen disenchantment of their constituent groups and further intensify conflicts.³³

But overall there is less concern over the risk of electoral violence than over the impact another mandate might have on the NCP’s already shaky commitment to reform and dialogue and on the commitment the opposition made in Berlin to re-engage on the dialogue.³⁴ Western observation missions will not be deployed, but the Arab League and China will send observers.³⁵ In a relatively unusual step, indicative of the fraught prospect of holding elections before there is any progress on dialogue, the AU has mandated a Technical Assessment Mission to Sudan without having yet decided whether to send an electoral observation mission.³⁶ The organisation is divided over the latter question, with some believing that sending observers would undermine the AUHIP’s mandated role in the national dialogue.³⁷ Given the importance of the dialogue, including for the suspended Darfur and Two Areas negotiations, and the foregone conclusion of the election, the AU should consider taking a less prominent role in the elections.

IV. Limited International Leverage

Western donors have dwindling influence to push the NCP to govern more inclusively and end the internal wars. The freezing of the ICC Darfur investigations, Sudan’s improved regional diplomatic position and (slightly) brighter economic prospects have given the NCP a distinct boost.³⁸ Some within the international community problematically believe the party’s continued dominance is preferable to a weak and

miyya order with supporters in the Gezira); break-off Umma parties; the Eastern Democratic Party; and LJM. Many are weak, which is why the NCP must offer uncontested seats.

³³ By January 2015, LJM officially divided into two factions (one led by the former chairman, Tijani Sese, the other by the secretary general, Bahar Idris Abu Garda) over Sese’s failure to transform it into a political party. The government could not prevent the split but is allowing both to contest vacant seats. Sese showed little interest in leading a party, feeding rumours he aims to become Sudan’s second vice president, an unelected post reserved for a Darfurian. “Sissi says divisions within LJM threaten to harm peace in Darfur”, *Sudan Tribune*, 24 January 2015.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, UN missions and officials, New York, February 2015; EU and U.S. diplomats, Addis Ababa, March 2015.

³⁵ Crisis Group meetings, Brussels, October 2014, January 2015; “Ghandour in Beijing: ‘Sudan Controls Borders with Neighbouring Countries’”, *Sudan Vision*, 28 January 2015.

³⁶ “AU Commission approved deployment of a pre-election assessment mission to the Republic of Sudan”, African Union, Addis Ababa, 3 March 2015; Crisis Group interview, international organisation official, Addis Ababa, March 2015.

³⁷ Given the large opposition boycott, AU election “support” risks lending weight to the already common charge that it is too close to the government to fulfill its role in the national dialogue.

³⁸ International Monetary Fund (IMF) Country Report no. 14/364: Sudan, December 2014, p. 9; “Sudan’s inflation falls to 24 pct in Jan – statistics agency”, Reuters, 10 February 2015. For the average Sudanese, the economic situation remains parlous, including high prices of basic food and commodities.

contested democratic transition that might bring violence, now generally contained in the peripheries, to the centre.³⁹ Recent regional instability, including in the Central African Republic, South Sudan and especially Libya, has increased these fears and the resulting caution.⁴⁰

A. *The U.S., EU and Germany*

U.S. and EU Sudan policies remain mired in internal disagreements over engagement or continued pressure. The U.S. repeatedly pledged during the CPA negotiations and subsequently that it would remove Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and gradually lift economic sanctions if the government accepted the outcome of the South Sudan independence referendum. Khartoum believes that in so pledging the U.S. delinked those concessions from the Darfur issue. While U.S. negotiators believe they conveyed the message that the pledges could not be fulfilled if grave human rights violations continued, especially in Darfur, not least due to a range of domestic lobbies, the government considers that Washington broke its word, a conclusion that now inclines it to pay less heed to Western blandishments.⁴¹ February 2015 visits to Washington by Presidential Assistant Ibrahim Ghandour and Foreign Minister Ali Karti resulted only in an agreement to “advance a more frequent and substantive exchange about our respective interests and concerns in the region”.⁴²

The EU position remains one of support for the national dialogue.⁴³ Member states have different views on how to engage with the country, including on the issue of a possible deferral of Bashir’s ICC indictment, which has been the subject of informal discussion since March 2014.⁴⁴ Germany’s creative unilateral initiative has engaged both the government and armed opposition groups, in parallel to the AUHIP – but as with the latter’s efforts, some opposition activists feel that Berlin is too close to the government.⁴⁵

³⁹ These fears are well noted by the regime. Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese government officials, June–July 2014. The government also has a sophisticated propaganda line about the dangers of instability. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, op. cit., p. 20.

⁴⁰ Alex de Waal, “Playing Many Sides, Sudan’s Bashir Tries Again to End His Isolation”, *World Politics Review* (online), 2 March 2015.

⁴¹ The U.S. has extended emergency sanctions on Sudan that have been in place since 1997 and were expanded in 2007; “Sudan denounces renewal of US economic sanctions”, *Sudan Tribune*, 26 October 2014. For the views of a key U.S. negotiator, see Princeton N. Lyman, “Negotiating Peace in Sudan”, *Cairo Review*, 3 March 2015.

⁴² Some U.S. diplomats play down Karti’s visit as an independent initiative of the Congressional Prayer Breakfast and say that subsequent easing of sanctions on telecommunications equipment was to enable the opposition and civil society to avoid Sudanese government surveillance. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Nairobi, February 2015. “Washington Welcomed Sudanese Presidential Assistant”, U.S. State Department, media note, 11 February 2015. “Expanding Avenues to the Internet for Sudanese User”, press release, U.S. embassy, Khartoum, 17 February 2015.

⁴³ “Council conclusions on Sudan”, Foreign Affairs Council, Luxembourg, 20 October 2014.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, April 2014.

⁴⁵ Unlike the AUHIP process, the German talks have not prioritised a ceasefire in the Two Areas but have tried to engage a broader set of actors than the government and SPLM-N, including other SRF components and official opposition and civil society.

B. *Egypt, Gulf States and China*

Egypt, the Gulf States and China arguably have more direct influence over the NCP, and though none are likely to push a reform agenda, they want stability. Khartoum had been vulnerable to withdrawal of financial support and possible subversion due to the anti-Muslim Brotherhood and anti-Iran axis of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but relations have been less fraught since late 2014, partly thanks to Sudan’s concessions and its very active diplomacy.⁴⁶

China shows no sign of abandoning its long-time partner. There have been a number of high-level ministerial visits and a military cooperation deal, and in January, the new presidential palace it built opened. But Beijing believes in political stability above all as a precondition for economic development, and despite its tradition of non-interference in domestic affairs, it will be keen to see an end to war and a more sustainable national political consensus.⁴⁷ In the Security Council, it now lets Russia lead in systematically opposing Western attempts to further pressure Khartoum. This began with South Sudan’s secession, when China, which has significant oil investments in the two countries, sought more balanced relations with them. Russia has taken a tougher stance on Sudan issues, among others, since concluding the West fooled it into authorising measures in 2011 that were used to topple the Qaddafi government in Libya.⁴⁸

While Khartoum benefits from the diversity of its external partners, especially Arab states, the AUHIP and China need to assess the risks of supporting the current context of unequal development and political marginalisation. Both would likely bear the largest cost and impact if Sudan were to implode. China’s role as a key development partner puts it in a unique position to provide less orthodox support to the dialogue process. While much of the dialogue’s focus is “political”, Beijing could – if more sensitive to conflict drivers than in the past – offer important assistance to negotiated outcomes that address the economic and developmental priorities driving many of Sudan’s conflicts.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ In February 2014, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar suspended all bank transactions with Sudan; Saudi Arabia also stopped livestock and gold imports. By May these measures were reversed, and political and financial re-engagement gathered pace as Sudan closed Iranian cultural centres and denied links to the Egyptian Brotherhood. “Egypt ambassador – Sisi keen on boosting relations with Sudan”, Egypt State Information Service, 30 November 2014. Sudan also claims to have assisted in de-escalating the tension between Egypt and Ethiopia over Nile waters; on 21 February, Egypt attended a Nile Basin Initiative meeting in Khartoum for the first time in five years, “Egypt attends extra-ordinary meeting of Nile Basin Initiative in Sudan”; text of report by Egyptian state-run news agency MENA, BBC Monitoring, 21 February 2015.

⁴⁷ One of the key motivations for Chinese-supported mediation between South Sudan’s warring parties in Khartoum was the security of its investments, including the Sudan-South Sudan pipeline. For China’s role in Sudan, see Daniel Large and Luke Patey (eds.), “Conclusion”, in *Sudan Looks East: China, India and the Politics of Sudan’s Asian Alternatives* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 176-194.

⁴⁸ “Russian FM says Moscow plans to boost military ties with Sudan”, *Sudan Tribune*, 3 December 2014.

⁴⁹ Large and Patey (eds.), op. cit.

C. *The African Union High Level Implementation Panel*

The AUHIP helped broker the September 2014 national dialogue agreement between the SRF and NDC⁵⁰ and in November continued attempts to mediate new talks on the Two Areas between the government and SPLM-N. Both sides endorsed an AU-drafted framework agreement, including a roadmap for rebel participation in the future dialogue.⁵¹ But the AU has not achieved its goal of “parallel/synchronised” talks between the government and the SPLM-N (Two Areas)⁵² on the one hand and the government and Darfur rebels on the other.⁵³

On 4 December, facing a deadlock over the scope of the Darfur talks and the risk it might cause a collapse of the Two Areas negotiations, the AUHIP decided to adjourn the Darfur discussions indefinitely. Some feared this might open the door to another piecemeal deal and divisions within the SRF (as with past Darfur processes). The AUHIP tried unsuccessfully to save the Two Areas talks by suggesting a cessation of hostilities (CoH) be agreed in South Kordofan and Blue Nile as soon as possible, due to the humanitarian emergencies there, even if fighting continued in Darfur.⁵⁴ Despite the Paris Declaration, Sudan Call, and the Berlin Declaration, the government is clearly banking on the fragility of the opposition consensus and SRF divisions,⁵⁵ though the military breakthroughs it expected have not materialised. In January 2015, the AUHIP wrote the chief negotiators of both sides, requesting clarity on CoH positions.⁵⁶ The responses did not move the process forward; the next moves on national dialogue and ongoing fighting on the ground will determine the prospects for the Addis talks.⁵⁷

V. **Conclusion**

Barely twelve months after the NCP announced its readiness to begin a national dialogue, the preparatory process has fallen victim to political manoeuvring and is overshadowed by looming elections. In the meantime, the NCP has recovered some of its poise after its *annus horribilis* (2013) and the more distant trauma of South Sudan’s independence. It continues to preside over its own version of a multi-party system and retains well-defined constituencies, especially among big business and farming interests, smaller merchants and the large military-security apparatus that arguably remains its most powerful support base. These – especially the latter – are unlikely

⁵⁰African Union Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) communiqué, 16 September 2014.

⁵¹Awaited since Bashir’s immediate rejection of the 28 June 2011 framework agreement signed by NCP’s Nafie Ali Nafie and SPLM-N’s Malik Agar; see Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (III)*, op. cit., pp.18-19.

⁵² This was recommended in *ibid*.

⁵³ The panel worried that the expected “complexity” of the Darfur talks “might jeopardise” the negotiations between the government and the SPLM-N and blamed the “weakness on the [Darfur] armed groups”. Crisis Group interviews, AU and AUHIP officials, September 2014-January 2015. Alex de Waal, “Darfur Déjà Vu”, *African Arguments*, 16 December 2014.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, AUHIP and other international officials, January 2015.

⁵⁵ The AUHIP puts primary blame on the government but also blamed Darfur rebels for not having a coherent position on the DDPD that would help get past the deadlock. Crisis Group interviews, AUHIP officials, January 2015.

⁵⁶ Letter dated 7 January 2015, on file with Crisis Group.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Addis Ababa, March 2015.

to accept another externally-brokered accommodation of armed groups and their economic demands after the poor returns from the CPA.

More talk, in the form of intense inter- and intra-party deliberations inside and outside the promised national dialogue process, local discussions between divided communities and negotiations over humanitarian access, not to mention further generational turnover, may be the best short-term options. Greater efforts toward proper implementation of the regional peace agreements, especially in Darfur, might give the remaining armed rebellions more confidence in negotiated peace.⁵⁸

However desirable a truly comprehensive approach is, it seems as distant as ever: the NCP does not want it, and the opposition front is still susceptible to divisions. But if the AUHIP, assisted by the parallel German “track-two” initiative, can reset the parameters of the national dialogue to include both more parties – including those with ties to the rebel fronts, if not the official representatives themselves – and a parallel process of government-rebel talks in Addis Ababa, there may be a chance to find some common ground. Above all, while conditions are currently tipped in its favour, now is the time for the government to make good its promises to create an environment conducive to dialogue in word and deed that many of its actions in the year since the announcement have contradicted.

Nairobi/Brussels, 11 March 2015

⁵⁸ The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) model in Ethiopia – though not without deficiencies – is an example of how relative regional administrative autonomy can be promoted by a strong central party with a “transformational” agenda, abetted by an equally strong and partly politicised military.

Appendix A: Map of Sudan



Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

AU – The African Union

AUHIP – The African Union High-Level Implementation Panel, the AU’s mediation panel chaired by Thabo Mbeki.

Beja Congress – Political group set up in 1958 to end the marginalisation of ethnic groups living in eastern Sudan.

Berlin Declaration – Declaration signed by armed and unarmed opposition forces in Berlin in February 2015.

CPA – Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 ended Sudan’s second civil war.

DDPD – Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, a 2011 largely unimplemented peace agreement.

DUP – Democratic Unionist Party, political opposition party led by Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani.

ICC – International Criminal Court, a permanent international criminal tribunal located in The Hague.

Islamic Movement – Islamist movement established by the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) in 1999.

JEM – Justice and Equality Movement, a Darfur rebel group and key SRF component.

LJM – Liberation and Justice Movement, a former Darfur rebel group that largely transitioned into a political party in 2015.

National Dialogue – Dialogue process between the government and armed and non-armed opposition groups.

NDC – National Dialogue Committee or “7+7 Committee”, tasked with coordinating the national dialogue process.

NEC – National Election Commission, Sudanese electoral commission established through the interim constitution of 2005.

NCF – National Consensus Forces, a coalition of political opposition parties founded in 2010.

NCP – National Congress Party, since 1989 the ruling political party of Sudan, chaired by President Omar al-Bashir.

NISS – National Intelligence and Security Services.

NUP – National Umma Party, largest political opposition party chaired by Sadiq al-Mahdi.

PCP – Popular Congress Party, political opposition party, led by Hassan al-Turabi and member party of the NCF.

RNP/M – Reform Now Party/Movement, political opposition party established by NCP dissidents and part of the NCF.

RSF – Rapid Support Forces, government paramilitary formations operating under NISS command since 2013.

SAF – Sudanese Armed Forces.

SCoP – Sudanese Congress Party, political opposition party headed by Ibrahim al-Sheikh and member party of the NCF.

SLM/A – Sudan Liberation Movement/Army, Darfur rebel group set up in 2001. SLM/A has since splintered into multiple factions.

SLA-MM – Sudan Liberation Army faction Minni Arku Minawi, the Zarghawa faction of SLM/A and a key SRF component.

SLA-AW – Sudan Liberation Army faction Abdelwahid Mohammed Ahmed Nur, the Fur faction of SLM/A and a key SRF component.

SPLM/A-N – Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-North, rebel group based in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

SRF – Sudan Revolutionary Front, an alliance of armed opposition chaired by SPLM/A-N’s Malik Agar.

Sudan Call – political communiqué signed by armed and unarmed opposition forces in December 2014.

“Two Areas” – Term covering South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, where armed conflict is occurring between the Khartoum government and insurgents.