

## SUDAN: ALL QUIET ON THE EASTERN FRONT?

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At the beginning of 2005 a few well-informed observers on Sudanese affairs issued warnings that the international community's focus on the appalling humanitarian and political crisis in Western Sudan should not be allowed to obscure another possible disaster in the neglected east among the Beja.

The Beja are a non-Arab Muslim people numbering in excess of 2.5 million, speaking dialects of the TuBedawiye language. They have occupied the Red Sea Hills and Sudan's eastern deserts for centuries and their settlements straddle the Egyptian and Eritrean borders. Though some Beja farm on wadi land, most have eked out a traditional existence as nomadic herders of camels, cattle, sheep and goats. Associated with them in their isolation and marginalisation are the Rashaida, Arabic-speaking and relative newcomers to the Red Sea Hills, whose ancestors migrated from the Saudi peninsula in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like the Beja, among whom they live, they are pastoralists.

The fate of the Beja and Rashaida serves as a reminder that the nature of the historic grievances of Sudan's marginalised majority against their rulers in Khartoum depends to some extent on whether we are talking about the north or south of the country. This is important, because the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) concluded in January 2005 between Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) focused

principally on issues of power-sharing and autonomy as these concerned the oil-rich south. This in itself has to be borne in mind in discussion of how the CPA might indeed be made nationally 'comprehensive'.

For many northerners, including the Beja, it was the process of administrative and economic centralisation initiated in the 1970s by General Nimieri and continued by subsequent administrations that brought about the most significant erosion of such rights as they might claim as citizens. The abolition of native administration in the northern provinces and its replacement by provincial councils may have looked like progressive reform, but its effect was to reduce the influence of traditional heads and increase that of local government bodies dominated by administrators and merchants well connected to the authorities in Khartoum. Also from 1970 onwards, legislation was passed by means of which local peoples were deprived of control over their land resources, which became increasingly subordinated to the demands of cotton plantation and mechanised agricultural schemes run by the politically well connected.

Severe and protracted drought in the 1980s killed off perhaps 80 per cent of the Beja's live-stock, forcing many to take up meagrely paid employment either in Port Sudan or as labourers on the mechanised agricultural schemes. For decades the Beja had augmented their

pastoral livelihoods with subsidiary activities in time of need, but economic alternatives to herding now became the permanent lot of many tribesmen, as economic changes to the local social and political fabric are probably irreversible. The Red Sea region also came under pressure from new waves of migrants in the 1980s: West Africans, Darfurians, Nubians displaced by the flooding of Lake Nasser, and refugees from the Eritrean conflict. This added a potentially more national dimension to local grievances, which has been reflected lately in closer cooperation between political groups claiming to represent the marginalised in east and west.

A year after Beshir seized power a number of Beja army officers were executed in a purge of 'unreliable' elements. The new regime also continued with the alienation of tribal lands and the suppression of local Muslim traditions held to be at odds with the 'orthodoxy' as proclaimed by Khartoum.

Initially the Beja sought to keep alive their political resistance through the Beja Congress, which had been established in the 1960s and had revived in the brief periods of democratic government since. In 1989, the Beja Congress threw in its lot with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which had been formed by Sudanese political parties and unions banned by the new National Islamic Front regime. In March 1990 the Sudan's People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) joined the alliance, whose initial priority was to restore democracy by political means, but by 1994 the collapse of Eritrea's relations with Khartoum over the latter's sponsorship of Islamic insurgency against Asmara led Eritrea to allow the opening of a military campaign from inside its territory. Most of the constituent parts of the NDA provided military forces on this new front, but the majority came from the Beja Congress and the most experienced from the Sudan People's Liberation Army's (SPLA's) New Sudan Brigade. There was also a group from the Rashaida, the Free Lions Forces, which raided across the territory south of Kassala.

By the late 1990s the NDA had held a strip of land along the Eritrean border between Kassala and Hameshkoreb, and by October

2002 the Beja Congress had extended this rebel control to include Hameshkoreb and territory towards Karora near the Red Sea coast.

When Eritrea and Ethiopia went to war with each other in 1998, Asmara's support for NDA's militants was reduced, and the organisation began to engage more seriously with Khartoum on a diplomatic level. Although some Beja leaders found accommodation possible with the Sudanese government, others felt that the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in particular had ceased to take Beja interests seriously, and in December 2004 walked out of the NDA talks then beginning in Cairo and which concluded with agreements in January and June 2005.

Although a group of leaders claiming to represent the Beja Congress are still in Khartoum with a view to further negotiations, others in the Red Sea Hills have maintained a more belligerent position. In January 2005 elements of the Beja Congress and the Free Lions carried out raids on a police station. A few days later, political demonstrations among the Beja in Port Sudan, where they now make up almost half the population, elicited a savage response from the authorities in which more than 20 demonstrators were killed and hundreds detained without trial.

At about this time the Beja Congress and the Free Lions confirmed their military alliance under the banner of 'The Eastern Front'. In May they succeeded in kidnapping three local administrators, and the following month launched a more spectacular operation in which they attacked government outposts outside the garrison town of Tokar, and claimed to have captured a number of Sudanese troops and amounts of arms and ammunition. Khartoum's response was to issue stern warnings to Asmara, which it blamed for stimulating the rebellion, much as it blamed the Eritrean government for supporting the Darfurian insurgency. Beja allegations that indiscriminate aerial bombardment of civilians had also occurred have as yet been unconfirmed by independent sources.

These incidents gave some credibility to suggestions that Khartoum was about to face a second front in the east, and one that would involve an armed insurgency close to

the country's strategic communications and pipeline through Port Sudan and near to the regional centre of Kassala.

It has to be noted, however, that although the Red Sea Hills may offer a useful base area from which armed groups might raid government positions and essential infrastructure, the crucial nature of the communications network and, indeed, its very existence would also make it imperative, and relatively easy, for Khartoum to deploy overwhelming force in its defence. The withdrawal of SPLA forces from the area, in terms of the Naivasha agreement, has also made a repeat of earlier rebel successes in the region improbable, claims of reinforcement from Darfurian migrants notwithstanding. Whether considerations of the likely civilian costs of such a renewed campaign will weigh heavily in the calculations of its advocates is a moot point. A war on two fronts remains at present a remote possibility, particularly at a time that Khartoum is reaping the diplomatic benefit of the favoured position granted it in consequence of the Naivasha accords.

Ironically, Khartoum's position has benefited from the inclusion of the SPLM as a junior partner in the administration, though at the expense of ignoring very real questions about the SPLA's claims to represent southern interests. For the moment, however, one can expect that such questions of representivity will be restricted to commentators from outside the policy process, especially now that the NDA, or at least part of it led by the DUP, has signed up to the CPA. It was interesting that John Garang went to Asmara immediately after the signing of the Cairo Accord with the NDA in June, for talks with President Isaias Afewerki. While there he expressed his sympathy for the plight of the Darfurian and Beja insurgents, sentiments that might earlier have elicited rebuke from Khartoum. That none was forthcoming suggests that Garang enjoyed President Beshir's tacit support in his efforts to sell the CPA to the other marginalised northern groups as the only framework for addressing their grievances. The backing of the international community, eager to dissemble the democratic shortcomings of the peace agreement they must now support and defend, may also be assumed.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing, the AU has brought sufficient pressure to bear upon Darfur's Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) to induce them to sign a Declaration of Principles with the government of Sudan that will shape the next round of peace negotiations, scheduled to commence towards the end of August. This, the relative lull in the direct violence on the ground, and promises of a substantial increase in the size of the AU monitoring force, may well serve to divert such global public attention as the Darfurian atrocities have garnered. Whether any of the signatories of the Declaration of Principles can exercise control over their forces on the ground remains to be seen.

The international focus on Sudanese affairs has now shifted to the inauguration of the interim process proper, the promulgation of the interim constitution, the formal inclusion of the SPLM in the executive and legislature, and the dawn of what some, against all evidence to the contrary, believe will be a national process of democratisation.

No one disputes that there are plenty of spoilers still able to upset the political and diplomatic process. The Umma Party and some other northern opposition groups remain unconvinced; the Nuba and the inhabitants of Blue Nile wait to see what this peace will mean for them; numerous southern armed militias have still to be brought into the fold; and the SPLM itself will be subjected to internal strains as seldom before. But it is the potential for 'internal' spoilers that gives the most pause for thought: will the military junta and the SPLA be able or willing to yield the advantages they have secured at Naivasha and open the political arena to competition that must ultimately threaten the commanding heights they now grudgingly share with one another? A study of political history in general and of Sudan in particular would suggest that this is unlikely. On this reading, a democratic outcome in Sudan, if it is to emerge at all, will more probably be the outcome of developments unforeseen, and unwished for, by the protagonists.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that this article was written before John Garang's death.