

Sudan Elections Deemed Fair, Amid Foreign-Backed Destabilizations

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

In mid-December, while Americans were still wondering who had been elected in the Presidential elections, the population of Sudan went to the polls, to elect its President and a Parliament. As some election officials joked, their system is nowhere as modern as that used in the United States, with its voting machines, butterfly ballots, and stylus punches. The Sudanese system is based on paper ballots, marked with names and symbols of candidates. Ballot boxes for different offices, are distinguished by color.

Another major difference in the two systems, is money: Whereas in the United States, billions of dollars were poured into the campaigns, to rig the primaries, and top-down establishment control ensures that no candidate outside the mainstream may even have access to national media, in Sudan, money is no issue, and media have been opened to all, on an equal-time basis.

The mechanism of the elections is very different as well: As the chairman of the General Elections Commission, Abdul-Monueim Al-Zein al-Nahas, explained in an interview with *EIR*, part of the parliament (National Assembly) is elected directly, and the rest, through associations (see interview below). The President is elected by direct popular vote.

As the results were released on Dec. 29, it appeared that incumbent President Gen. Omar Hassan al-Bashir had been reelected by a wide margin, over his leading competitor, Ga'afar Mohamed Numeiri, also a former President, who ruled from 1969 to 1985. Bashir received 86.5%, and Numeiri, 9.6%. The remaining three candidates, Dr. Malik Hus-sain, Dr. Al-Samual Hussein Osman, and Mahmoud Ahmed Juha, received between 1 and 1.6% each. According to official results, over 8 million of 12 million eligible voters participated in the elections. Opposition parties challenged the figures, both for the turnout, which they said was much lower, and for the vote tallies. Despite such protests, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Arab League, which monitored the elections nationally, both certified them as fair.

Elections in a State of Conflict

Although the elections went smoothly, over the ten-day period from Dec. 13-23, they were not "normal." First, because of the continuing war in the south, waged against the government by the insurgent Sudanese People's Liberation

Army (SPLA) of rebel John Garang, voting could not be held in three of the 26 federal states. The SPLA boycotted the vote.

In addition, three opposition parties did not participate: the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Umma Party, and the Popular National Congress (PNC), a split-off from the ruling National Congress.

Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the PNC, had raised a challenge to President Bashir, in December 1999. Turabi, as Speaker of the National Assembly, had presented legislation changing the manner of electing state governors, as well as altering the structure of the Presidential republic. The move, which came after a series of other political challenges, led to the creation of a dual-power situation, which President Bashir denounced as a threat to the unity of the nation. The session of the National Assembly was disbanded, and Turabi deprived of his powers, both in the Assembly and the National Congress. In response, he founded his own splinter group, the PNC.

The political crisis leading to the early dissolution of the National Assembly meant that elections would have to be held, to reestablish that body. These were the elections just completed.

As for the other two parties, DUP and Umma, both were members of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), an umbrella group in exile, which includes the SPLA. The NDA has worked closely with British intelligence and related U.S. agencies, to overthrow the Bashir government.

For its part, the Bashir government has been conducting negotiations with leading figures of the NDA, in an effort to establish national reconciliation among opposition and government forces. Its dialogue with the political parties, was the second phase of its peace policy, which had begun with government negotiations with various rebel movements engaged in the war in the south; since 1996, when an initial agreement was struck with several groups, the process has led to a peace treaty, and the creation of institutions for its implementation. However, the continuing insurgency of the SPLA, and the parallel operations by the NDA, have undermined its rapid progress.

The DUP split more than a year ago, and one of its historic leaders, Sharif Hussein al-Hindi, returned to Sudan to take part in the national reconciliation process. As Dr. al-Nahas explained to *EIR*, although al-Hindi did not take part in the



Election posters filled the streets of the capital. Here, a poster for the campaign of incumbent President Omar al-Bashir. Left, a sample ballot.

elections, he supported the candidacy of Bashir, and is expected to assume political responsibility in the future. The remaining DUP leader, Mohammad Osman al-Mirghani, refused to take part in elections.

The situation with the Umma Party, led by Sadiq al-Mahdi, is more complex. Mahdi, who was ousted in 1989 by a coup led by General Bashir, had been living in exile until he struck an agreement, the Nation's Appeal, to start a reconciliation process with the Bashir government, in November 1999. In March 2000, his party left the NDA umbrella, and the militias associated with his group declared a cease-fire. In November 2000, he returned to Sudan, committed to completing the process of national reconciliation, in the interests of preserving national unity, and ending the war in the south. "We started dialogue with the government," he said on his return, and "will carry on this dialogue until the end, because we are people of responsibility and sincerity, and fear disintegration of our country and internationalization of its problems." He also denounced the idea, held by "some" southerners, and broadly spread by the international media, that there is "an Arab-Islamic hegemony" in the north "that should be counteracted by an African hegemony."

Mahdi's decision to leave his self-imposed exile, marked a turning point in the political life of Sudan. It not only broke the foreign-controlled NDA operation, utterly discrediting it, but established the precedent for a political solution to the country's conflicts, including the military confrontation in the south. Following his return, Mahdi engaged in talks with President Bashir, and they reportedly discussed the opposition leader's reintegration into ruling institutions. Shortly after Mahdi's return, Bashir declared, "We are ready to go along with Sadiq al-Mahdi till the end of the road. I mean he

will fully participate in power." Bashir said that negotiations with the Umma Party were proceeding, and that the two sides aimed at reaching an agreement on power-sharing by the time the elections were completed. It is widely believed that, in the new government to be composed following the elections, Mahdi will play a role. His contention has been that the process of national reconciliation must be carried out, before general elections should be held. Thus, Mahdi's decision not to participate in the vote was the logical consequence of his plan to first reach a comprehensive political settlement with the government.

Enter Susan Rice

The positive shift in Sudanese internal relations, triggered by Mahdi's return to the country, was not looked upon with favor by those foreign forces which have been in league with the political and military opposition, in attempts to overthrow Bashir. It is not coincidence, therefore, that once the NDA had been undermined by Mahdi's defection, and particularly after he had entered into negotiations with the government in Khartoum, those foreign forces would move.

It was in the same week as Mahdi's return, that Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary of State in the outgoing Clinton Administration, illegally entered Sudan, from the south. Rice was following the script of British intelligence asset Baroness Caroline Cox, who for years had campaigned against the Bashir government, and sided with the SPLA forces in the south. Cox, who was the international controller of the NDA, repeatedly entered Sudan illegally, and claimed to find children sold into slavery, whom she and her Christian Solidarity International "bought back to freedom." (CSI was expelled in late 1999 from the United Nations as a non-governmental