

Peace Is Our Strategic Goal

Mahdi Ibrahim Mohammad is chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly of the Republic of Sudan. He was interviewed by Lawrence Freeman in Washington on Aug. 26, 2011. Here are excerpts of their discussion.

EIR: It is now approaching the second month since the separation of Sudan into Sudan and South Sudan, and I would like to get your evaluation of how things are proceeding, and what the future looks like for the two Sudans.

Ibrahim: Thank you. Well, at the outset, I would like to say that secession is not an everyday occurrence; it's the kind of thing that comes after so many years, maybe in a century even. And it's not an easy matter, dividing a country, for whatever reason. It's an extremely costly enterprise, and it wouldn't have come easily unless Sudan had a very clear vision about the significance of peace, stability, development, and progress for its people. And as you know, we suffered five decades of instability and conflicts, which impeded the welfare of the entire country, North and South.

President Bashir and his government worked very hard, from the beginning, to bring an end to this conflict between North and South, and peace was a strategic goal. We maintained our very clear vision that unity is a better deal for all the people of Sudan: You have a bigger country, huge resources, an enormous population. You have all the valuable natural resources and the human resources; sharing them together with a plan, or strategy, certainly would give the country a better future.

But yet, we gave our brothers in Southern Sudan the right to secede, if they chose to, after six years of transition, in which we would experience a united country, and work together in that direction.

When they finally made this choice, because of our

clear vision that peace is strategy, we implemented the peace agreement, and accepted the result of the referendum and recognized the new government. This was an unprecedented event, that President Bashir went to the South, and recognized a new state. We established the first embassy there, an unprecedented step. The world needs to recognize that Sudan has done something extremely remarkable—not only for Africa, but worldwide.



Since then, we have focused our attention on trying to build the mother Sudan, and this is one of the fundamental ideas: to reconstruct the country, after making sure that peace prevails all over the territory of the North. And to manage the human resources, and the natural vast untapped resources of the country, on the basis of a strategy which we already developed in consultation with all the parties, and with all the technical people, to marshal all these resources in the direction of rebuilding the country.

We need massive infrastructure. Even after secession, Sudan has 1.8 million square kilometers, and 33 million people spread all over this vast land. So we still need major infrastructure: roads, railways, and electrification of the country and the rural areas, beside the urban areas. We made development of the agricultural sector part of a strategic plan, on which the future of the country will be hinged.

Even after we develop agriculture, we have immediately to couple that with developing agro-industry, to give our people more opportunity for employment. That will give the country more production, meet all its needs for crops, and allow us also to develop our industry, realize domestic needs, and at the same time respond to the needs of our neighbors in Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. Certainly we are also building dams and bridges, and advancing the higher education of the country, multiplying considerably the number of schools and developing the education system.

This is all part of a strategy to move from a society that has been devastated by the war, to a society that is progressively moving forward, improving the conditions of its people. And from that perspective, we have focused tremendously on the issue of democratization....



EIRNS/Douglas DeGroot

Sudan's Merowe Dam is the largest hydropower project in Africa, and will add more than 1 million acres of arable farmland to the region. As of 2009, when this picture was taken, two out of ten turbines had been fired up.

Future North-South Relations

EIR: Obviously, the separation had wrenching effects on the North and the South. The people are told, “Now you’re part of this section,” “Now you’re part of that section.” As a result of that, conflicts have emerged, which are, in my opinion, the result of this wrenching decision. In the news in the United States, now, there’s a great deal of concern about the conditions in the Nuba Mountains and South Kordofan.

So, I’d like you to address that from the standpoint of how you see future relations between Sudan and South Sudan. How do you see that progressing, and getting over the current difficult situation that Sudan is in?

Ibrahim: Before coming to that, I would like to shed some light on the serious and challenging economic problems that came to us because of secession.

Historically, Sudan is an agricultural country; it’s been like that for so many years. But ten years ago, we started extracting oil and selling to the world, after realizing that we had satisfied domestic need. With secession, 75% of the discovered and extracted oil goes to the South, and 25% to the North: Certainly that is a major challenge to the budget, and to the national financial interests of the country. . . .

We have inherited many problems because of this secession, but the government has developed a plan to absorb these challenges, and to accommodate the difficulties. The fundamental thrust is to reduce government expenditure, to increase local production in agriculture and industry, and to focus more on the production of the basic needs of the people—food, sugar, cooking oil, and flour, so we do not have to import, or at least import less.

At the same time, the government reduced the salaries of the top government officials, the parliamentary officials, all the top guys. And it’s not a small reduction—their salaries were reduced by 25%. This happened maybe four or five months ago.

EIR: Including your own salary?

Ibrahim: Yes. Before secession, we started that, in preparation for the challenges we were going to face. I assure you that the government is very serious about addressing these issues, and I hope that we’ll be able to overcome them. But certainly secession came with so many problems for us. We have to see that peace prevails.

EIR: Given the fighting going on inside your own country, with support that you point out is coming from the South, what kind of policy overtures do you have as a member of parliament in the North, to overcome this? Because the South is going to be your most important neighbor, and potential ally in the future. What kind of overtures are you offering to have a positive working relationship in the future, with the new country of South Sudan?

Ibrahim: As I mentioned earlier, from the early time we told the President of Southern Sudan that we would like to see the best of relations between North and South: peaceful, friendly, brotherly cooperation; open borders, and economic cooperation. There are issues that remain between us. We were supposed to address them before secession, but unfortunately, we didn’t succeed, because there are differences in opinion between us.

We believe very strongly that the spirit that took both parties—the SPLM/SPLA [in the South], and the National Congress/government of the North—from warring parties to negotiating partners, to signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, to implementing it, to conducting the referendum, and to recognizing its results until a new government of [Southern] Sudan was established on July 9, 2011—must return. We think the spirit that created all these processes, is the spirit we need to resolve the remaining issues, so that the relations between our two countries will not be soured by such behavior, which is a gross diversion from the relationship which is supposed to characterize our relationship between North and South.

Certainly we are doing all this because we have peace as a strategic plan, in our vision. But we hope that our brothers in the South will come to their senses, and will stop aggression, and will not be encouraged by the fact that the West has always supported them. . . .

Relations with the U.S.

EIR: I have one final question, about the relations between Khartoum and Washington. The United States has been involved in Sudan for many years, since the government of President Bashir came into power in 1989, and now there were agreements or promises made for a roadmap to normalization. This is your first trip to the United States, I believe, since the separation occurred. You could give us your evaluation of the future of U.S.-Sudan relations on these key issues for normalization?

Ibrahim: As former ambassador to the U.S. from Sudan, I know very well the government of Sudan, the President of Sudan, and I've always looked for better relations between Sudan and the U.S. We were very conscious there was no colonial relationship between Sudan and America, and because of that, there was no animosity against Americans in Sudan.

Also, in Sudan, we do distinguish between the government of the U.S. and the people of the U.S. And we are very conscious that the people of the U.S. are very friendly, very open-minded; they have a high sense of fairness, and they are very generous. Maybe it is the case in every part of the world. People generally are different from governments.

Certainly in the history of the governments of Sudan and the U.S., the last 20 years, we had so many difficulties. But the government of Sudan has never come to

despair. We still think there is an opportunity for the relations between our two countries to improve considerably. Historically, American governments used to say that the war between North and South [Sudan] was souring the relations; at some point they started saying that human rights violations because of the war and other things soured the relations; at some point they spoke about terrorism, and others spoke about relationships with other countries.

But in all honesty, Sudan was able to address these things adequately, because this is part of its vision, part of its responsibility toward its people: to address adequately all the challenges it faces. We were able to move from a military government, to an elected government; from a country that faced a protracted war between North and South, to end that war, in a landmark peace agreement; and finally, even to give the South a separate country. And we were able also to improve the economy, to extract oil, and, as a result, to liberalize and reform the economy, in a manner that gave us stable and steady growth, with an average of 7-8% for the last 15 consecutive years.

We were able to expand education. We were able to embrace the different shades of opinion, build parties in the country—we now have 70 of them. So, the country has moved considerably, and successfully. It's true, there are difficulties and suffering, and a price. We moved from those difficult times into a new era—with stability, with peace, with economic progress—of democratic transition.

I believe, and the government of Sudan believes, that all the issues that were part of the contention between our two governments have been resolved. Now the U.S. has to live up to its promises: its promises to end sanctions, and to stop putting Sudan on the list of countries harboring terrorism. All the American intelligence agencies know very well that this is not true; it is a political armament used to intimidate Sudan, and keep it under sanctions.

I recently had a visit with the Assistant Secretary of State, Mr. Johnnie Carson, and it was a constructive meeting. In very explicit terms, he emphasized the position of the U.S., and it was encouraging. They are committed to the roadmap, and they're working diligently in this direction. I hope that both countries will be able to reach the climax of this roadmap, by allowing the relationship between them to usher in a new era of cooperation, dialogue, and understanding, rather than confrontation.