

# The Struggle for Power within Sudan's Top Leadership

Dec 23, 1999



Brief Analysis

On December 22, Sudanese president Umar Hasan Ahmad al-Bashir met Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Cairo on Bashir's first visit there in six years. The day before, he met the leaders of four other Sudanese neighbors (Libya, Eritrea, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo) in Tripoli, Libya. These visits were calculated to show that Bashir is in charge, after his December 13 dissolution of the parliament and declaration of a state of emergency. He acted to secure his position as the parliament was on the verge of adopting amendments to Sudan's constitution that would have curbed his powers while increasing those of Parliamentary Speaker Dr. Hasan Abdallah al-Turabi, with whom he has uneasily shared power since 1989. Despite Bashir's show of confidence on his regional trip, the power struggle between Sudan's militant Islamist leaders makes it less likely that the present Khartoum regime could resolve the problems that most concern the West, from human rights abuses to terrorism.

Who Will Steer the Ship? The hitherto concealed power contest between Sudan's two strongmen and their respective camps accelerated in early 1998 after the death of Sudan's first vice president, Muhammad Salih al-Zubayr, in an airplane crash in the war-stricken South. Zubayr, a top army officer and prominent Islamist militant--as are all of Sudan's top echelon officials--was second to Bashir in the regime's executive hierarchy. His sudden disappearance exacerbated the Bashir-Turabi rivalry. In October 1999, Turabi acted to abolish the leadership office and leadership council, which had previously been dominated by Bashir's men, thus restricting his power.

With last week's declaration of emergency, Bashir struck back, saying, "Two captains commanding one ship would cause it to sink." But it remains to be seen who will have the last word. Despite Bashir's dominance of the army's top command and the positioning of his loyalists in key posts in the country's foci of power, he could not politically neutralize Turabi. Yet, Bashir's success is not guaranteed. Turabi is a well-experienced and sophisticated politician who commands a large number of loyal cadres and heads the most effectively organized and militant political force--the National Islamic Front (NIF), which was organized the year earlier and renamed the National Congress. It was Turabi who engineered the regime's rise to power, shaped its zealous Islamist ideology, and oriented its domestic and foreign policies. His control of the country's policy-making practices--whether directly or through his supporters, many of whom are themselves powerful and ambitious politicians--is deeply entrenched.

If Bashir is able to consolidate power, he may well take steps to rehabilitate his regime's adverse reputation, acting primarily to disassociate his regime from terrorism. But it is by no means clear he could achieve much in this regard, given domestic opposition to such moves from both Turabi's militant political camp and other Sudanese political forces. More likely will be a continuing period of internal instability in which the problems that concern the West will fester.

Problems at Home. In recent years, the regime sought to project itself as a peace-seeking, democratic body. Attesting to this effort were the 1996 elections of Bashir for a five-year term of office as president and of Turabi as Speaker of the parliament, the 1998 approval of a new constitution by a national referendum, and the 1998 establishment of the National Congress--a new political, ostensibly broad-based party. Nevertheless, none of these moves has either broadened the regime's base of popular support, ended the sixteen-year civil war, or ameliorated the country's acute

economic crisis.

The peace negotiations with the broadly based Sudanese opposition--the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which includes the southern SPLA--remain deadlocked. The November 26 agreement with the northern-based Umma party did not lead to any substantial progress. Moreover, the September bomb attack--launched by the Sudanese opposition on the oil export pipeline that was completed in August to link the oilfield in the south-west of the country to the tanker terminal on the Red Sea--signified a new escalation in the regime-opposition relations. The bomb attack illustrated the opposition's long-stated warning that the oil production and installations could not be secured without a political settlement between the two sides. The explosion triggered a security clampdown on dissent, mainly on Mahdi's Umma party, severing earlier negotiation between the party and Khartoum.

**The Shari'a Issue.** Last week Bashir reiterated his commitment to shari'a (Islamic law), promising "not to betray it." This has been among the most contentious issues in modern Sudanese politics. Shari'a was first imposed in Sudan in 1983 by former president Jafar al-Numayri. After the overthrow of his regime two years later, however, it was suspended and virtually shelved. During the 1986-89 democratically elected government of al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, Turabi persistently demanded that shari'a should be reimplemented, justifying even the use of jihad (holy war), if needed. At the same time, the Southern People's Liberation Army (SPLA) refused to open negotiations with the Khartoum government over stopping the ongoing civil war unless shari'a was formally repealed. Mahdi was inclined to agree and the two conflicting sides came closer than ever to an agreement over settling the devastating civil war. But the determination of Turabi's NIF to enforce shari'a no matter the political and economic cost, including the perpetuation of the civil war, led to the 1989 military coup by Bashir and Turabi, putting an end to Mahdi's democratically elected government. During its first years in power, the Bashir-Turabi radical Islamic regime was mainly preoccupied with turning Sudan into a fully Islamic state. It gave high priority to implementing the shari'a throughout the country, although formally excluding the non-Muslim South.

**Isolation Abroad.** The Bashir-Turabi leadership failed to achieve any dramatic breakthroughs in relations with the United States, the country most pivotal to Sudan's interests. The pronounced U.S. antagonism toward the regime continues to be Sudan's most serious foreign policy problem. The Turabi-Bashir leadership had long viewed the United States as its sworn enemy and perceived Americans as determined to eradicate it. Khartoum views Islam as the main cause of U.S. animosity. In reality, U.S. hostility toward the Sudanese regime stems from Khartoum's stance on terrorism, its repressive internal policies and human rights violations, and its vehement solidarity with the anti-Western radical camp in the Middle East. Since 1993, the United States has listed Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism. Washington has encouraged cooperation among Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda in what the Sudanese regime sees as an effort to eliminate it. Furthermore, in August 1998, the United States launched cruise missile attack on a Khartoum factory Washington said was being used to produce chemical weapons, signaling an all-time low in Khartoum-Washington relations.

The tightened regional noose of isolation around the regime throughout the last decade, particularly by Egypt, also caused the regime distress. The United Nations Security Council in 1996 imposed sanctions on Khartoum at the urging of the United States and Egypt, after an alleged Sudanese-sponsored assassination attempt against Egyptian president Mubarak while he was visiting Ethiopia. Nevertheless, Bashir's visit to Cairo is the latest sign that Egyptian-Sudanese relations may be improving.

The peace agreement between Sudan and Uganda, signed on December 8 in the attendance of Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi and former U.S. president Jimmy Carter as witnesses, committed the two countries to disband terrorist groups and to prevent any acts of terrorism. Yet, the agreement might face difficulties because it does not have the support of the SPLA, which is largely in a position to dictate events along the two countries' border.

In conclusion, it would be highly premature to see the recent changes in Sudan as creating the basis for an

improvement in Sudan's relations with the United States.

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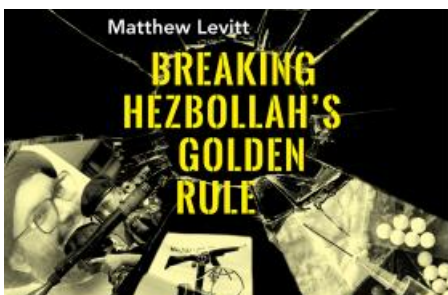
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