

Sudan puts new Constitution into effect with multi-party elections

by Lawrence Freeman

The following interview with Sudan's Ambassador to the United States Mahdi Ibrahim Mohamed, which reports on the progress by the government of Sudan in its long march to develop its political system, contains information that has been censored from all the other Western media. Since the takeover of power in 1989 by Gen. Omar Hassan al-Bashir, who is now the elected President, Sudan's leaders have courageously navigated through a difficult, if not hazardous course, to transform their political institutions and develop their economy. This has been accomplished despite a British-orchestrated "civil war" that has continued uninterrupted since 1983, and since 1989 has drained enormous resources from the government, which would have otherwise contributed to improving the well-being of the population.

The announcement of the formation of new political parties in Sudan in January, in preparation for new elections, is a remarkable achievement by the Sudanese people, and stands in stark contrast to the systematic destruction of so many of the nations of Africa. Despite the repeated efforts to overthrow the government of Sudan (see *EIR*, Jan. 15), including invasions by Eritrea and Ethiopia, the U.S. bombing of its pharmaceutical plant in north Khartoum, sanctions, and attempts to politically isolate the country, Sudan has not only persevered, but has progressively strengthened its sovereign existence as nation.

A brief review of the historical highlights of this process include:

1989: The revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation, under Lt. Gen. Omar al-Bashir, takes power.

1991: A federal system is introduced.

1996: In March, for the first time in Sudanese history, there is a direct, popular vote for President, as well as elections to Parliament. General al-Bashir is elected President with a 75% majority.

In April, a Political Charter outlining the principles for durable peace, is signed with the majority of rebel groups.

1997: In April, a final peace treaty is signed by all the major rebel factions except that of John Garang (the Sudanese People's Liberation Army).

1998: In February, at the conference of the National Congress, the formation of political parties is hotly debated.

In March, President al-Bashir sends the new Constitution to Speaker of the Parliament Dr. Hassan al Turabi, where it is

debated and ratified.

In June, a national referendum on Sudan's new Constitution is passed by 96% of registered voters of the population.

1999: In January, new political parties are formed, as is a Constitutional Court.

The formation of new parties is an important break with the past, when parties were formed on religious, sectarian bases, and not on constitutional principles. Both the Umma Party of Sadiq el Mahdi, and the Democratic Unionist Party, represent the old tradition of Sudan's narrowly constituted parties.

Only those hard-core enemies of Sudan, and Africa, who are fanatically opposed to any African nation achieving real independence and rising to the level of a sovereign nation-state, will not rejoice at these latest promising developments.

Interview: Mahdi Ibrahim Mohamed

Mahdi Ibrahim Mohamed is Sudan's Ambassador to the United States. He was interviewed by Lawrence Freeman on Jan. 8 by telephone in Khartoum, where he was recalled after the U.S. air bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum in August 1998.

EIR: I understand that there have been some very exciting political developments in Sudan. Could you please fill our readers in on some of these developments?

Mahdi: The government of Sudan has been preparing for a number of years for a very serious transition, and many steps have been taken in this direction. The last one was the passing of the permanent Constitution, through wide deliberations undertaken by the elected National Assembly and by referendum, where more than 80% of the people supported the new Constitution.

And now, as a result of that, a law has been passed to build new parties in the country. And starting from the first week of the new year, any hundred people who are of the same mind can come together and register to build a new party, whether with an old name or a new name, it doesn't make a difference. The important thing is that it be within the Consti-

tution, and within the laws that have been promulgated, and that they believe in the democratic way of competition, and that they should have a program.

They should also not use violence to change the system of government that is already established in the Constitution. And as soon as their party is registered formally, then they can exercise their rights at all political levels.

Fortunately enough now, seven parties have started registering during this week. And we are expecting to see more parties coming to register.

This move is a very serious one on the part of the government, because for years it has been saying that it is destined to ultimately put power into the hands of the people of the country. We hope that our brothers inside Sudan, and also outside Sudan, particularly, should take this opportunity very seriously. And we hope that they will come back, and if they believe that they have public support, they can engage in establishing their parties, and practicing democracy within the law, within the Constitution, and within the system.

EIR: You mentioned to me earlier that a Constitutional Court has been established. What would be its function?

Mahdi: In order to facilitate for the people of Sudan generally, and for the parties in particular, we have established a Constitutional Court for the first time in our history. If there is any contest between parties, or between a party and the government, or between different institutions, then the Constitutional Court is going to plead that, and its verdict is final.

So, this is a new development, and a very serious one in our history. And, the Constitutional Court is a very strong instrument to enable any individual, or any party, to contest. If it has a real problem, it will be party to the judgment of that Constitutional Court.

For the first time also, we have established a system of registering, so that the registrars will handle the procedures of the new parties and will finalize their right to act as — what should I say? — practice, all their activities as political parties, within the law. And, we believe that this is a major development in our country.

Historically, our parties were not established within a legal framework, or within the Constitution. They were established as an outgrowth of traditional religious sects. They were not established on a program, or with the sense of accountability, or that they run their affairs in a democratic manner and that their leadership should be elected, and all of those principles were not observed, to a great degree, in our historical parties.

But now, for the first time, we are making all this within the law and within the Constitution. And we hope that this will be a new experience, and that Sudan will actually [grow from] this new experience and democracy will flourish. We have already established freedom of the press.

And all political detainees — there were not more than four before this law was passed, but anyway, we released the four,

or around that number. So, there are no political detainees now in the Sudan, and we are witnessing this new mood. We hope that we will see a new experience of democracy in an African country like Sudan, which will be an example.

EIR: Does that mean that the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party are also welcome to come back and form new parties, and get involved in the political process?

Mahdi: Yes, we have opened that for all of them, with one condition: that those who are still insisting on using force to overthrow the government, should abandon that, because they cannot have it both ways — to use force to overthrow the government, and at the same time, to accept to work as a political party. This cannot be meshed.

Whoever believes in the Constitution, and in the cornerstones, should abandon the use of force, and should engage in the political debates and the political competition through parties to take power — but not through the bullet.

So, it is open for them, with only one condition: that they abandon the policy of using force.

EIR: What does this do to those who say that Sudan's government is an Islamic dictatorship, has no democracy, and is run by the National Islamic Front? How do those critics now respond to this extraordinary development, where an African country has a multi-party system?

Mahdi: I think this is an opportunity for all those to review their positions, and to try to be more practical, and try to be more genuine and serious, by recognizing what is happening in the country. There is no way now to deny this major development that is taking shape in the country. And we hope that they will correct their mistakes, and recognize this development in Sudan, and will try to support the direction toward civil society, a democratic system of government, and the multi-party system of parties, and rule of law, and the constitutionality of the regime now.

And this is very interesting, because now, the 26 councils, which are like the parliaments of the different states, were dissolved, so that this gives an opportunity to the new parties to compete. They were dissolved from the beginning of the year in order to give the new parties an opportunity to participate in the elections for the 26 parliaments in the different states. One year later, the National Assembly will also be dissolved, so that the new parties will contribute and will compete for the new National Assembly in the coming elections one year from now.

And the next year after that, the Presidency will be open for candidature contest from all the parties, and the party of the government as well.

EIR: When will the elections take place for the 26 councils?

Mahdi: Maybe four months from now.

EIR: And then, in January 2000, the National Assembly will

be dissolved, and there will be elections for the National Assembly, and in the year 2001 —

Mahdi: Yes. And one year after that, for the Presidency.

EIR: And therefore, we hope to see elections some time in the spring from this multi-party system, for the 26 states?

Mahdi: Yes.

EIR: I think that would be quite a development, when you contrast that to what is going on in other African countries, especially in Central Africa, where countries are being torn apart, and sovereignty is being destroyed. Here in Sudan you have a different direction being taken. It should be encouraging to the rest of Africa, and to the rest of the world.

Mahdi: I agree. I think one difference is, that Sudan has started to build a state from 1989, when there was a very serious and genuine movement going toward democracy. We are in a very serious transition. Just consider, step by step, the development of our country and our people. And so, we started building and moving into an elected parliament, and then, little by little, we were moving in this direction — liberalizing our economy, opening the Sudanese market for international investment, expanding universities and schools, and investing in oil; and now, in June this year, we're going to export our oil.

And this system, this government, was moving, step by step, toward economic liberalization and political democracy. And some, as you said, were skeptical about it. But little by little, all that program is now implemented and in place. Last year we were able to pass our permanent Constitution, and now we have started the multi-party system of government, with all the important institutions — like the Constitutional Court, and freedom for the parties, and freedom for the press, and the registration system that will help the parties to make the turnaround.

I think this is a very serious development. And we hope that those who are doubtful, those who are skeptics, will be genuine enough to open their hearts and minds to recognize this change, and to support and encourage all those who are under their advice, to try to come back into Sudan and be part of this process of democratization and economic liberalization.

EIR: When we were in Sudan in February 1998, we saw the signing of a major deal which involved several countries, including China, for development of your oil, and also for an oil pipeline. Could you give us some report on the progress of Sudan's endeavor to become oil-independent, and eventually an oil exporter, during the last 11 months?

Mahdi: Actually, China, Malaysia, Canada, and some British companies and German companies are already now engaged in the process of developing our oil, our pipeline, and our refinery. And by June 1999, the pipeline, which is Africa's longest pipeline, 1,610 kilometers, from the oil fields to Port

Sudan on the Red Sea — our oil will be for the international market. And this is a very serious endeavor being undertaken by the government, and it is now about to be fruitful, for Sudan and to the world. And we are open. We invite Americans and Europeans and Asians as well, and Latin Americans — all of them are invited to invest more in Sudan, particularly in oil or in strategic minerals, or whatever. This country is extremely rich in natural resources, and our mind and heart are open, and our investment laws are being improved each year, to give the investors a better deal.

So, in June, we will see Sudanese oil coming to the international market.

EIR: Given United States policy toward Sudan, following the bombing of your pharmaceutical plant, would you like to say anything to the American people, in regard to what Sudan would like to see for future U.S.-Sudan relations?

Mahdi: Certainly we have been in a course of very serious engagement with the American government, because we want to establish normal relations with the U.S. government and with the American people. We don't see any real problems between our two countries or our two peoples. It was only the unfortunate incident that happened in August, when the American missiles landed in our modern pharmaceutical plant, under the guise that it is a chemical weapons plant. That was a very unfortunate incident, and was condemned from all sides, and by many countries of the world. And we hope that this obstacle will be removed.

And it is very easy to be removed. The U.S. administration knows very well that when they commit a mistake — we know that mistakes, and also errors of judgment or misinformation, are not of intent — but if the U.S. administration is serious and keen to improve relations between our two countries, I think it is not difficult to do that, on their side.

We hope that they will take this very seriously, because objectively, the development of Sudan — and the people of Sudan would like to have a normal, constructive relationship with the U.S. government and its people, and they would like to see an exchange of culture and trade, and whatever is beneficial to the peoples of the two countries. And we don't see any problems objectively between Sudan and the U.S. We just hope that the U.S., this administration, will not take somebody else's agenda from the neighboring countries, or from far away, to use against Sudan, because those are somebody else's agenda.

For so many years they have been speaking about democracy and the representation of other parties. Now we have seriously reached that stage, because we are going in that direction, according to our own program. That has been resolved now. And we hope that if this was a major grievance on the side of the U.S., that now this obstacle is removed.

So, little by little, every obstacle is removed, and there is no logical reason for the U.S. administration not to change its course toward the government of Sudan and its people.