

A CAUTIOUS WELCOME FOR SUDAN'S NEW GOVERNMENT

For the second time in just four years, the government of Africa's largest country by area, Sudan, has been overthrown. Deposed this June 30, Prime Minister Sadiq el Mahdi came to power in 1986 promising to end the costly civil war between Sudan's Muslim north and Christian and animist south. His failure to do this — combined with the dismal state of Sudan's economy — apparently prompted an impatient Sudanese army to topple him. The new government is led by Lieutenant General Omar Hassan Ahmed al Bashir, a little-known army officer. He has announced that his top priority is ending the six-year war.

The change of regime in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, should be cautiously welcomed by Washington. For one thing, the Bashir government does not appear hostile to the West. For another, the new government has an opportunity for politically reconciling Sudan's warring parties, a long-standing American objective. Bashir already has announced a unilateral cease-fire with the country's southern rebels and offered to discuss their differences with them. Regionally too the coup appears positive for the United States. Bashir has announced that he seeks a strong alliance with neighboring Egypt, which has welcomed his government and sent it humanitarian support. Conversely, the Sudanese coup appears to be a setback for Libya's Moammar Qadhafi, who was beginning to consolidate strong diplomatic and military relations with the Mahdi government. Bashir is not likely to sever contact with Qadhafi, but relations between Khartoum and Tripoli are expected to be more distanced.

Sudan is strategically located. Three of its neighbors — Ethiopia, Libya, and South Yemen — remain hostile to American interests. Sudan borders the strategic Red Sea that leads to the Suez Canal. The Nile River, which runs through Sudan, empties in the Mediterranean Sea. Sudan's eastern coast is only some 150 miles from oil-rich Saudi Arabia; its southern coast borders Kenya, one of Africa's few pro-Western nations.

Bitter Divisions. The new Sudanese government inherits several severe problems. The country is deeply and bitterly divided along religious lines. In 1983, Mahdi's predecessor, Gaafar al-Nimeiry, imposed harsh Islamic laws, called *sharia*, which were immensely unpopular in Sudan's non-Muslim south. These laws, which include the amputation of limbs for some offenses, were a major factor in prompting a southern rebel movement, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to take up arms against the Sudanese government. With military support from Ethiopia's Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, the SPLA has taken control of a large portion of southern Sudan.

The second major problem facing Bashir is the country's bankrupt economy and its famine. Last year, an estimated 250,000 people in southern Sudan died of hunger and hunger-related diseases because Mahdi's militias pursued a ruthless scorched earth policy to rid the region of cattle and crops which could be used by their enemies. Once famine commenced, Mahdi exacerbated the

crisis by delaying international relief organizations access to the region. Outside of the south, Sudan's economy is also in ruins. Despite considerable irrigated land and oil reserves, Sudan has one of sub-Saharan Africa's poorest and most mismanaged economies. The government has amassed a \$13 billion foreign debt and has been unable to pay even the interest, mostly because it has been spending an estimated \$400,000 daily on the war effort. The economy has been burdened further by extensive price and production controls that greatly have stifled productivity and created a large black market.

A third major problem is the need to restore democracy. As unpopular as the Mahdi government eventually became, it rose to power through free elections in 1986, a rare event in African politics. Thus far, Bashir has been governing through a military council and has given no indication that he intends to return Sudan to democratic rule.

Resuming U.S. Aid. Sudan has received U.S. aid for 31 years. Last year, it amounted to \$43 million in economic assistance (mainly food and other humanitarian aid). This assistance now is suspended because of U.S. law prohibiting funds to a government coming to power through a military coup. Exceptions are possible, however, through a presidential waiver. George Bush should grant the waiver to resume assistance to Sudan. As an incentive for Bashir to end the country's civil war, eliminate price and production controls and return Sudan to democratic rule, the Bush Administration should offer Bashir a modest increase in assistance once progress is made.

In dealing with Sudan's new government, the major challenge facing the Bush Administration will be assisting Bashir to end the Sudanese civil war. Bashir has offered to hold a referendum on the controversial *sharia* laws, but even this is not likely to be enough to satisfy the SPLA since two out of three Sudanese are Muslim. Instead of a referendum, the Bush Administration should encourage Bashir to grant the south greater autonomy to develop a legal system more acceptable to the region's populace.

Timetable for Democracy. The Bush Administration also may consider offering to mediate talks between Bashir and the SPLA. Bashir has reportedly asked Ethiopia's Mengistu to mediate the talks. As the major arms supplier of the SPLA, Mengistu cannot be expected to act objectively. By contrast, American mediation will lend prestige to the negotiations. Additionally, the Administration should urge Bashir to set a realistic time and schedule for a return to democracy, and then inform the Sudanese leader that violating that schedule may endanger U.S. economic assistance to Sudan. The Administration also should urge Sudan's new government to eliminate the controls on prices and production and adopt market-oriented policies that will encourage economic growth.

Finally the Bush Administration should urge Bashir to cooperate with neighboring Ethiopia's democratic resistance, most of which operates from southern Sudan. Ethiopia's communist government has been weakened deeply by a coup attempt in May and the opportunity now exists for a change of regime. This not only would benefit the U.S. strategically, but also would likely improve Ethiopia's human rights record. Bashir can contribute to this by assisting militarily and politically those noncommunist Ethiopians fighting Mengistu's government.

Support and Hard Advice. Sudan's new leader has expressed his desire to end the religious intolerance and economic disaster plaguing Africa's largest nation. Doing so will not be easy. The Bush Administration can best serve U.S. interests in the Horn of Africa by offering the new Sudanese government support, while also giving it the hard advice it will need to bring democracy and economic relief to a country that sorely needs them both.

Michael Johns
Policy Analyst