

Cairo Weekly Interviews Sudan's Al-Bashir on Ties with Egypt, US, SPLM

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(FBIS Report) On 23 August, Cairo Al-Musawwar in Arabic, a government-owned weekly magazine, publishes, on pages 4-11 and 60-64, an 11,000-word interview with Sudanese President Umar al-Bashir by Chief Editor Makram Muhammad Ahmad. In the interview, which takes place at al-Bashir's home in Khartoum on 15 August, al-Bashir affirms that he has no "100 percent guarantee" that the application of the right to self-determination in the south would not lead to its secession. He dismisses talk about definite unity after six years as "unrealistic."

The interview deals with Egypt's concern about Sudan's unity and how Sudan sees it, the prospects of Sudan's relations with Washington, the impact of the secession of south Sudan on neighboring African countries, relations with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, SPLM, and economic conditions in the country.

The lead to the interview is devoted to attempts by "several circles in the Sudanese capital to turn Egypt's reservations on the south's right to self-determination into a crisis in relations between the two countries, as if Cairo's concern about Sudan's unity is not legitimate. Regrettably, self-deception has made some depict Egypt's concern as if it were an Egyptian call for the continuation of the civil war, which has been raging for 19 years to no avail. They say Egypt does not care for Sudan's security and stability, but is only after its security and water interests. It seems Egypt is not entitled to express a differing opinion on what the Sudanese consider to be in their own interest, as if Sudan is now too big to be Egypt's younger brother!"

Ahmad further refers to some Sudanese circles as fabricating reports on Cairo contacting opposition leader Hasan al-Turabi and receiving his deputy, Ali-al-Haj, at one of Egypt's intelligence apartments in Nasr City, Cairo, to coordinate "a joint campaign to foil the Machakos agreement." Dismissing the reports as false, Ahmad critically reviews what he says al-Turabi has done to relations with Egypt and how his "stupid policies have aggravated the north-south crisis and turned it into a religious holy war against the people of the south."

Ahmad also dismisses as "foolish" the claims by some circles that Egypt objects to the secession of the south out of fear that it would strengthen the Islamic movement in the north. These circles claim that it would pose a graver threat to Egypt, as it would be

dedicated to exporting violence, providing shelter to terrorists, and reviving its old objective of establishing an Islamic nation worldwide.

In reply to Ahmad's question on what Sudan would expect Egypt to do now, Al-Bashir says, "The first round has settled all the basic issues. What we would expect Egypt to do is to use its international and regional relations and its influence in the Arab world to make unity the best option for the people of the south."

Explaining the reasons for his "strong optimism" that the Machakos Agreement would bring real peace, Al-Bashir expresses the conviction that this time, regional and international forces support the agreement and want peace and a solution to the problem.

Noting the conclusion of the agreement despite the failure of previous efforts, Al-Bashir partly attributes it to the many changes in the world after the 11 September events and the war on terror. "Perhaps it is the failure to address the Palestinian issue that stimulated world forces to look for a success story in another Islamic country like Sudan, to make up for their failure in Palestine." Another reason that Al-Bashir mentions is that Sudan is embarking on huge oil investments, adding that US oil companies have made great efforts in many parts of the country to identify the size of Sudan's oil wealth and reserves. "They left, only to return for investments when the circumstances are favorable and when there is a need for Sudan's oil. Furthermore, all are convinced that the US containment policy vis-a-vis Sudan has failed to reach a solution, so the United States is looking for a new approach. Meanwhile, international and regional forces are convinced that a cancellation of the IslAl-Bashir says that all the parties involved in the war are now convinced that it will never lead to the achievement of their objectives or to peace. They all support peace, but Garang says he will not drop his arms before a final solution is reached. "What nobody knows is that neither Khartoum nor the Movement (SPLM) have given an order or made a decision for a ceasefire. Each side is trying to improve its position," Al-Bashir discloses.

Replying to a question on the Khartoum government's efforts to make the southerners prefer unity, Al-Bashir admits that the responsibility of bringing about change, meeting the demands for democracy, and separating the Church from the State is no easy task. "Speaking about unity after 6 years being 100 percent certain is unrealistic wishful thinking." However, he sees the flight of southerners to north Sudan rather than to neighboring African countries in recent times as an indication that citizens in the south feel closer to the north, adding that they came in groups and are found in all parts of the north up to Egypt. Al-Bashir estimates that 3 million out of the south's population of 5 million fled to north Sudan, while 30,000-40,000 flew to Kenya and Uganda. He further says that they have a desire to return to Sudan, specifically to the

areas under the control of the legitimate government, and to flee from the rebel-held areas.

Al-Bashir says he is counting on the southerners who sought refuge in the north to convince their fellow countrymen of the advantages of unity.

Another helpful factor he cites is the declared US and British support of the unity option. He expresses hope that they will fund projects and services that would make life easier for citizens in the south. Asked whether he has received US assurances of working in the south to promote development and unity, Al-Bashir replies in the affirmative, adding that IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) and international organizations will see that the implementation of the agreement is proceeding in the direction of making the unity option favorable to the people of the south.

Ahmad notes that when US envoy John Danforth presented his report to President Bush, he did not mention anything about autonomy. Danforth's talks in Khartoum and in Cairo did not involve talk of autonomy either, as he spoke about maintaining Sudan's unity instead. Ahmad finds it surprising that despite the declared US stance in support of Sudan's unity, the Machakos Agreement makes self-rule a *fait accompli*. He further asks whether the Americans changed their mind during the talks in Kenya.

Al-Bashir explains, "In the final analysis, the agreement is not an American one, but a Sudanese one. It is concluded between the government and the movement, which has negotiating positions of its own and upon which it insists. The Americans are not for the secession of the south. But self-determination became a *fait accompli* in the Kenya talks because the political forces and the Sudanese opposition affirmed in their documents that the south has the right to self-determination. It would not have been possible for Garang and his comrades to sign an agreement that includes no self-determination. Meanwhile, the Sudanese constitution provides for it. We could not have refused to sign it because of the right to self-determination. This is a Sudanese matter, rather than a Western or an American one."

Expressing fear that splitting south Sudan would pave the way for "grave ethnic wars across the African continent," Ahmad asks two questions on the support of the United States and of neighboring African countries for steps that could lead to the division of Sudan. Al-Bashir repeats that the Americans are not in favor of the secession of south Sudan, and that some neighboring countries oppose it. He says Ethiopia is totally against it because the establishment of two states on its borders would cause immense problems. It has many ethnic groups and its constitution also provides for self-rule. As for Kenya, Al-Bashir says, "President Daniel Arap Moi has assured me that that he is convinced that secession would pose a threat to Kenya. The same applies to Eritrea."

He concludes that the presence of the south within a unified Sudan will ensure the stability of Sudan's southern neighbors. Referring to secession as "a big problem," Al-Bashir appeals to all African countries to support the unity scenario.

On the unity option and how to make it appealing to the south, Al-Bashir says 50 percent of the road is already covered. The program that Khartoum intends to present to the south involves respect for people's rights and the equality of citizens, as well as encouraging development efforts in the south. The government will do its best to broaden the scope of dialogue with the south and to repair what was ruined in the years of war. In this respect, Al-Bashir underlines the importance of dialogue with the people of the south, the neighboring African countries, and foreign support.

Asked whether he himself did not have worries about the prospects for secession, Al-Bashir says, "All I can say now is that the unity scenario has precedence, but the secession option does exist."

Ahmad notes that in the past, it was said that the discovery of oil in the south was encouraging it to ask for autonomy, but now it is said that oil is a unifying factor. Asked if the north too is floating on a sea of oil, as reported, Al-Bashir says there is oil in the north and that oil prospecting is under way in the northwest, near Chad.

Regarding ambiguity in the agreement and differences on whether it is going to be a federation or a confederation, Al-Bashir says the agreement states that it is a federation, because it does not give the south the right to have a foreign ministry, a defense ministry, a central bank, or a currency of its own. It gives the south special status within the federation because it does not refer to the south as an independent state.

Ahmad also asks whether the current US interests in Africa would make it turn over a new leaf with Sudan and pardon a country seen as a sponsor of terror, a country where there is no separation between Church and State, a promoter of violence in the name of religion, and an exporter of revolution.

Al-Bashir says the attitude of the present US administration is different from its predecessor's. First, it is against the economic boycott of Sudan and, second, the Sudanese Government has asked the CIA to verify that Sudan does not shelter any terrorists.

Regarding the division of power and wealth, Al-Bashir says negotiations are under way for that purpose. In reply to Ahmad's question about speculations on a 50-50 division of wealth between the United States and the federal government, Al-Bashir says this never happened.

Al-Bashir says that on the borders of the south are the three provinces specified in the 1956 agreement. He adds that the non-Arabs are the majority in Sudan and that the 3 million southerners present in the north and the thousands of northerners in the south have equal rights. The referendum will involve those who live in the south or who belong to it.

Regarding Egyptian concern, Al-Bashir says it is "legitimate, but the Egyptian objection to an agreement accepted by Sudan is worrying. Egyptian concern is legitimate, because if the referendum leads to secession, it will entail many grave things, chief among them a halt to the project for increasing the Nile water. Al-Bashir says it is better for all who have worries to sit together to reach results in the interest of voting for unity.

Asked whether he wants Egypt to catch the last IGAD wagon and to give its consent to something to which it was not a party, Al-Bashir replies in the negative. "I want the people of the south to feel that the Arabs and Egypt are standing by their side, not against them. We want an Arab summit fund for the development of south Sudan."

Reviewing some charges leveled against Egypt in Sudan and their holding it responsible for what is happening because it did not send an army to Sudan to defend its unity, Al-Bashir says Sudan never asked the Egyptian army to intervene. Referring to the Sudanese street response, he adds, "There was a current of independence mobilized against Egypt, and we cannot say now that it has disappeared."

Regarding domestic conditions, Al-Bashir says that when he came to power, 70 percent of the population was living in slums, but now services have been extended to them. School and university enrollment has risen and basic and other commodities are available. The 166-percent inflation rate has dropped to 7 percent, and the dollar exchange rate has stabilized over the past five years. "Indexes show that the Sudanese economy is making steady progress," Al-Bashir adds.

In the published interview, neither Ahmad nor Al-Bashir mention anything about Halayib.

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