

Sudan's Al-Bashir on Reconciliation, US Plot, Ties with Egypt

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Interview with Sudanese President Umar Hasan al-Bashir by Hamdi Rizq in Khartoum; date not given

(FBIS Translated Text) The interview with Sudanese President Umar al-Bashir reflected his optimism this time for several reasons: first, he is on his way to start a new term of office because the outcome of the presidential election results is expected to be announced within days. Second, the national reconciliation process has started to yield fruits and the return of the Ummah Party Chairman Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi to Khartoum has been described the beginning of the rescue. Third, the Sudanese economy has achieved remarkable improvement in recent weeks. The inflation is down to 8 percent and the growth rate is up to 6 percent, according to General Al-Bashir. Fourth, the Sudanese army has penetrated the military bases of the rebels in the southern Provinces and regained control over some important towns. It has also driven the opposition forces out of the strategic town of Kasala. As a result, the morale of the army and the President himself is rather high and the situation in the south is

In his interview with Al-Musawwar, the Sudanese leader said he was more enthusiastic about halting the war and achieving peace in south Sudan than anybody else because he has experienced its horrors and destructive impact. He added that all the parties to the conflict must agree on certain principles, because it would not make any sense if each government came to tear down the accomplishments of its predecessor. Al-Bashir also announced that he would soon launch a new national reconciliation program in order to achieve the most important goal of his second term.

General Al-Bashir answered all the questions clearly and frankly because he does not have anything to fear or hide as far as his policies are concerned. He does not think much before responding to question and he always expresses his thoughts freely and without hesitation. He insisted on receiving us at his home because he considered us guests in his country. One of the Sudanese officials who accompanied me to Al-Bashir's home told me I was lucky to get the chance to interview him immediately after he completes his evening prayers because he is usually in his best mood at that time. This interview lasted for about one hour.

(Rizq) Mr. President, what is your analysis of the incident that took place inside Al-Jarrafah mosque? Does Sudan suffer from the existence of violent religious organizations like the ones that have been bothering its neighbors for a long time?

(Al-Bashir) First of all, we must realize that what happened at Al-Jarrafah was a limited operation carried out by a few people. Therefore, its impact was rather weak. However, as long as it did take place, we must be vigilant, because one must be extremely cautious about such incidents. This was the third incident of its kind. The first one took place at the Thawrah Street Mosque and then there was the incident at Wadi Madani and finally this third incident took place. It is quite evident that the number of murdered or wounded victims is quite large in comparison with the size of the operation or the number of the perpetrators. Faced with such incidents, we not only rectify the mistakes of the security authorities, but also study the problem from all angles and on all political, security, social and intellectual levels in order to guarantee that it would not happen again. We also attempt to immunize the youth and the rest of the community against such problems.

(Rizq) We learned that the national security law will be amended soon, but have you revised the legal and security measures in a bid to minimize the impact of this phenomenon?

(Al-Bashir) Our society is still suffering from many problems such as backwardness and ethnic and religious disputes. When you talk about Sudan, you must cover many weaknesses because like any newborn state, Sudan includes numerous cultures and ethnic minorities within its geographical boundaries. Furthermore, the infrastructure is weak and we are still in the process of completing the road, railway and communication networks. Such essential services help to unite the nation. Moreover, our society is open to the outside world and it imports ideas and cultures from West Africa, East Africa and southern Africa as a result of the immigration process. Sudanese merchants travel abroad and bring with them pieces of foreign cultures that they pick up during their travels. All those elements contribute to creation of weaknesses in the society. Therefore, we must conduct a comprehensive revision of the security procedures in order to provide cultural, social and intellectual immunity for our country. (Rizq) Some people regard the arrest of six elements from the opposition's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at home, and the expulsion of the US Consul from Sudan as an indication that the margin of public freedom in Sudan has shrunk? What are the latest developments of this issue, and how does it affect US-Sudanese relations?

(Al-Bashir) There is no doubt that US-Sudanese relations have been quite tense for a long time, although we have exerted strenuous efforts to improve them. However, the US administration always insists on ignoring our efforts and being hostile towards

Sudan. Recently, the US administration thwarted Sudan's bid to become a member of the UN Security Council and blocked the efforts to lift the economic embargo imposed on Sudan. It provides the rebel movement in the south with money and weapons.

The United States extends military support to Garang in his war against us. In addition, the assistant Secretary of State has visited south Sudan without seeking our permission in a bid to prove that there is a slave trade in Sudan. They wanted to say that they came to Sudan and found a slave trade there. Ironically, they went to the southern areas held by the insurgents. Therefore, if they found a slave trade there, they should blame the insurgents, not the government. These are lies meant to tarnish Sudan's reputation.

Finally, there are recognized political opposition parties and organizations in Sudan which conduct their opposition activities peacefully. However, there are armed dissidents outside the country who launch military attacks against Sudan. The internal opposition representatives were the ones who attended that meeting with the US official, but the armed dissidents outside the country coordinate their operations with their counterparts at home. The United States plays a role in this conspiracy which aims at undermining the ruling regime. However, we have thwarted their plot.

(Rizq) In this context, what are your expectations about the future of relations with the United States in view of the fact that a new administration will soon take over at the White House?

(Al-Bashir) Usually, we do not expect the change of the US administration to result in any change in US foreign policy. However, there is at least a chance that the new administration might have a different approach or adopt different positions. If we evaluated the relationship with Washington in its entirety, we would find that the United States stands to lose a great deal as a result of this deterioration in bilateral relations. Suffice to say that US firms were the first to explore for oil in Sudan, but now, we have Canadian, Malaysian and European firms drilling for oil. Naturally, they are the losers in this respect. They imagined that without them, we would not be able to extract or refine oil. However, they were wrong. Their boycott did not deprive Sudan from the required technology because it exists in other countries and markets. Therefore, the losers are the US firms and their agents in Sudan.

(Rizq) Did Sudan not lose too?

(Al-Bashir) Yes, we did sustain great losses, but the self-inflicted US losses are greater.

(Rizq) What do you suggest to improve relations with Washington?

(Al-Bashir) We have already suggested the initiation of a direct dialogue and it did start. US security teams came to Sudan twice on fact-finding missions, but their findings were contrary to their expectations. The problem is that there are certain lobbies with a direct influence on bilateral relations working hard to block any improvement of our ties with Washington. Had it not been for these elements, we would have seen a different US position by now. We had granted an oil concession to a US firm in Port Sudan. The contract was ready, but then the US president came under pressure and the agreement was suspended. Furthermore, we started granting entry visas to the US diplomats to return to the embassy in Khartoum. Yet, one week before their arrival, the lobby moved to keep them from returning. The pressure groups remain hostile to Sudan, and they are very influential in this context.

(Rizq) What are these lobbies?

(Al-Bashir) Foremost among these groups is the Zionist lobby which controls everything in the United States. They influence the authorities, the decision-making centers and even senior administration officials. Usually the influential and leading figures in Washington are Jews. You find them everywhere: in the Departments of State and Defense and in the National Security Council. Jews assume all the pivotal positions in the US decision-making centers and they are antagonistic towards Sudan.

(Rizq) Do you think that Israeli plays a role in south Sudan?

(Al-Bashir) The insurgents maintain strong ties with Israel. They receive training, weapons and money from the Jewish State.

(Rizq) Why are the Eritrean-Sudanese relations always shaky? Do you believe that the United States has anything to do with this problem?

(Al-Bashir) Eritrea embraces the Sudanese opposition. We have initiated visits and meetings with Eritrean officials because we are keen on improving these relations. However, we were shocked to find out that Eritrea refuses to terminate its support for the insurgents. We find it difficult to forge bilateral relations and overlook the presence of the armed opposition forces in Eritrea, which launch attacks on Sudan from within the Eritrean borders. We cannot forget the presence of the opposition leaders and camps in Eritrea. How could we? First, they should eliminate all causes for tension before we could talk about any improvement in bilateral relations.

(Rizq) Mr. President, we cannot help wondering why you have decided to hold early elections? Why did you not postpone the elections to give the national conciliation

efforts a chance to succeed in holding a national dialogue and a comprehensive conference? How do you explain the fact that the main parties in Sudan have boycotted the elections? In light of this wide-scale boycott, how can you justify the organization of general elections? Would the boycott not affect the election results?

(Al-Bashir) I have called early presidential elections as a personal initiative. My five-year term is scheduled to end in April 2001. Besides, organizing early elections is something that happens in every country. Whoever wants to run for president has the chance to do so by submitting his application to a general election authority led by the former Deputy Chairman of the Judicial Council, who is known for his fairness, impartiality and outspoken support for rights.

The parliamentary elections, on the other hand, are not early. In fact, they have been delayed several times at the request of various parties. We have given the political parties ample time to prepare for this race. The reasons cited by the parties to boycott the race are too flimsy, from my point of view. If we delayed the parliamentary elections any further, we would be hurting the country. The constitution was endorsed two years ago, and the parliament was dissolved. The country cannot continue to live in legislative void. I consider the decision to boycott the elections an indication that the parties are not serious. Moreover, I do not believe that this boycott is as large as the media claims. Usually the Sudanese people are not too eager to participate in the vote during the first few days. However, in the last days of the election, large crowds often flock to the polling stations. I believe that the ongoing elections are both fair and transparent. We trust that the general elect(Rizq) Mr. President, this leads us to the efforts to achieve peace and end the war. Why are the conciliation efforts conducted under the IGAD or the Egyptian-Libyan initiatives, always stumbling? The NDA holds the government responsible for impeding those efforts and claims that the government is reluctant to bring about such conciliation. It also claims that you do not want to settle this problem in order to impose a new fait accompli with these early elections, thus making it impossible to reach national accord except through submission to the state authority.

(Al-Bashir) These are strange allegations. Nobody is more intent than we are to see peace reign and war halted in Sudan. I have suffered a great deal because of this war even before I came to power. War brings destruction and impedes the development of any country. We have held a national dialogue conference to discuss all issues pertaining to peace. It was attended by representatives of all political organizations, but people always forget that. The conference came up with effective solutions to resolve the chronic problem of the south. We agreed to share wealth and power and to create a federation, which was a key demand of the southern brothers since the independence of Sudan. Our delegations traveled with the rebels to Addis Ababa,

Abuja, Zaire, South Africa, Italy and Frankfurt to present our proposed solutions, but the rebels always showed intransigence.

We come close to clinching a deal many times, but Garang always failed to show up. When arrangements were made to hold a meeting between Garang and myself in South Africa, he left Johannesburg. The southerners who are keen on realizing Sudanese interests, have returned home. The so-called NDA is not serious about making peace. We have named our delegation to the negotiations to resolve the differences between us, in line with the Egyptian-Libyan initiative, but they kept stalling and so far have not named their delegation.

(Rizq) In this context, what do you think about the recent moves by the NDA? We mean by that the attack on Kasala and the conspiracy with the US embassy to foment unrest during the presidential and parliamentary elections. What conclusion have you drawn from your meeting with Mr.

Muhammad Uthman al-Mirghani in Asmara?

(Al-Bashir) I went to meet with Mr. Al-Mirghani in Asmara with an open heart and I was pleased by the outcome of this meeting. However, the attacks on eastern Sudanese areas have complicated the situation and pushed it back to what it was before the meeting. The NDA has violated the agreement and attacked innocent civilians, while we were serious about reaching a final agreement. The malicious intentions of the NDA leaders abroad towards the government became apparent in the meeting between their representatives in Sudan and the US official. The agenda that these conspirators have discussed showed that they planned to topple the government. The documents have been published in the newspapers. They talk about coordination and future arrangements for the period that would follow the toppling of the regime.

We welcome all those seeking to follow rational political activities that serve the nation, whether they belonged to the government or the opposition. However, this determination to show intransigence and destroy all the efforts to serve the interests of the nation is simply unacceptable. I told you before that I had agreed to meet with Garang in South Africa, three years ago. However, he eluded the meeting and it became clear to the observers of the peaceful initiative and to us that he was not willing to reach any solution. We knew that in advance, as we also knew that he is under western influence to avoid resolving the problem because if the problem were to be solved, it would hurt the interests of those western forces.

(Rizq) Mr. President, with regard to Sudanese relations with international and regional powers, we wish to inquire about relations with Egypt. Why have they not been

positively developed? And what about your relations with President Husni Mubarak? How do you plan to develop and enhance the Egyptian-Sudanese relations?

(Al-Bashir) The Egyptian-Sudanese relations are strategic ones. Each country represents the strategic depth of the other. Therefore, their national security and interests remain central and essential. Even if some differences have come to undermine our relations occasionally, they have never affected the essence of these ties. We believe that with Egypt's capabilities, civilization and power; and with Sudan's natural resources, capabilities, and cultural heritage, they could form together an Arab force that may serve as a nucleus for Arab integration and even unity.

We thank God that the tension, which occasionally marred our relations, is fading now. In my recent meeting with President Mubarak on the fringe of the Arab summit, we agreed on new infrastructure projects that will serve our vital interests.

(Rizq) Mr. President, how do you see the future of Sudan if you were re-elected? Will the regime remain under siege on both the domestic and international levels? How long will the opposition continue to fight the regime, and until when will this southern war continue? Finally, how do you intend to overcome the economic crisis in Sudan?

(Al-Bashir) My election program has already been published on a wide scale. If I win the election, this program will represent the government's approach in the near future. It is based on the completing the national project to emphasize the Sudanese identity. Perhaps the most important aspects of this program are to seek to establish a federal rule that will secure a fair division of power and wealth, and work on consolidating the control, legislative and justice services, so that the values of equality, and justice prevail in the country.

With regard to the economy, we intend to liberalize it and give the private sector will full opportunity to invest in the country under conditions that encourage and support investments. We will also follow a foreign policy that protects our national interests and those of the other states. Moreover, we will refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of other countries. Our foreign policy will also fight hegemony and lend special attention to our neighbors, with whom we share the same natural borders and demographic features.

(Rizq) In a few days, the election will be over and you are expected to win and remain president for another term. Has the Salvation Revolution managed to become a state after 11 years of rule in Sudan?

(Al-Bashir) You cannot separate the revolution from the state because the revolution is a process of changing the social, economic and political realities. We believe that

we have reached the level of a state and constitutional institutions. However, the revolutionary drive still motivates the state. One of the goals of the revolution was to transform Sudan into a state with a stable political life. The regime kept shifting a turning from a multi-party system, to a military rule, an uprising, a democracy, a totalitarianism and so on. We want to achieve political stability that meets with the satisfaction of all political powers. This satisfaction comes from the popular powers' sense of participation in the decision-making process. For instance, the opposition must differentiate between opposing the government and opposing the state. It is now bearing arms against the state, which is a very serious problem. The animosity for the government has turned into an animosity for Sudan.

(Rizq) Mr. President, the problem is not with the political programs, but rather with the economic ones. The poverty is clearly felt on the Sudanese streets and I believe that the people who seek to put food on the table, do not suffer from political problems or feel left out of the decision-making process.

(Al-Bashir) When the revolution started, Sudan was one of the five poorest countries in the world. This poverty was not caused by the government. It was the result of accumulating problems caused by previous governments. Therefore, we are not directly responsible for this poverty. There is no doubt that the Sudanese people suffer from poverty, but the Salvation Revolution has had to deal with an unbelievably weak infrastructure. Our country used to depend on foreign assistance to cover 80 percent of its needs. Naturally, when subsidies were cancelled, the country had to survive on only 20 percent of the previous resources.

No economic miracle could be expected within one year, for instance. It was an uphill battle, but we managed to control the economic situation and now we have such healthy economic indicators as the reduction of the inflation rate to 8 percent and the stability of the exchange rates for 3 successive years. Moreover, the growth rate has increased to 6 percent, which is high by all standards. We are now talking about overcoming the budget deficit for the first time. All those indicators prove that the economic situation is stable. There are now good opportunities to liberalize the economy. Nowadays, the markets are beginning to flourish and the increase of salaries is no longer devoured by inflation.

(Rizq) Some people are talking about a few individuals who control all the wealth in Sudan.

(Al-Bashir) The fact of the matter is that nobody has the kind of money you are talking about in Sudan. The private sector is so weak that we have had to slow down the privatization process.

(Rizq) Finally, there is an important question that we wish to ask you. How long will you continue to offer reconciliation if the opposition continues to reject your offers?

(Al-Bashir) It is our duty as a state to offer reconciliation and close Sudanese ranks. As a state, we will never tire of making those reconciliation offers.

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