

INTERVIEW WITH DR LAM AKOL OF THE JUSTICE PARTY

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Introduction

Dr. Lam Akol was a senior member of the SPLM/A before joining Dr. Riek Machar in a rebellion that split the mother party. He then broke from Dr. Riek, after which he signed the Fashoda Agreement with the government in 1997 and became the Minister of Transport. Dr. Akol held this position until a year ago. He is the author of 'SPLM/SPLA: Inside an African Revolution' and is currently a leading member of the opposition Justice Party. ASAP conducted this interview with Dr. Lam on 31 May 2003 in Khartoum.

Assessing the current IGAD peace process

Dr. Akol was very optimistic about the outcome of the peace process in his meeting with ASAP. However, he follows Special Sudan Envoy General Lazarus Sumbeiywo and others who expect that negotiations will extend beyond the end of June, the anticipated completion date. While acknowledging that both the SPLM/A and GoS were highly apprehensive about the process and outcome, Dr. Akol said that circumstances dictate a final peace agreement. He said the parties 'do not have the freedom to indefinitely delay the outcome'. The Sudanese people, whether in the north or the south, want an agreement. The mediators, and in particular the US (which plays a critical role in the negotiations) understand this very well and this provides them with considerable leverage. The Sudanese will 'cling to the agreement. It will be an agreement of all the Sudanese and not just the parties in the negotiations'.

Dr. Akol emphasised that the peace process was 'a mechanism for survival for the National Congress government', and not the beginning of retribution for its past crimes. Sudanese will look to the future and

focus on bigger issues than the fates of individuals. While individuals may be held accountable for particular crimes, the regime will not be tried and it should take comfort in this. Dr. Akol gave the example of Kenya where Daniel Arap Moi was removed from power democratically and without retribution. Change through an organized peace process and legitimate elections offer a less threatening means for the National Congress government to relinquish power than the alternative of an insurrection.

While acknowledging that the IGAD mediators together with the GoS and SPLM/A have largely worked together to keep Sudanese civil society and other political forces out of the peace process, Dr. Akol said that those days were over. SPLM/A has increasingly accepted the role of southern civil society and the northern political parties – as can be seen in the recently signed Cairo Declaration – as genuine participants in the peace process and this serves to bring pressure on the GoS and the IGAD mediators.

Expanding the IGAD peace process

Dr. Akol told ASAP that the IGAD peace process, which was limited to the GoS and SPLM/A, was too restrictive and was no longer tenable. In the interests of legitimacy and sustainability, he held that other forces had to be brought on board. He did not think this would result in undue complexity for the process and that there could still be a resolution of the outstanding issues by August. Dr. Akol said there was already widespread agreement on the principles underlying the peace negotiations and that most of the Sudanese parties have accepted the IGAD process. However, he thought that the GoS would effectively be isolated by bringing on board a wide variety of political groups.

Dr. Akol did not think that giving IGAD, and in particular the Kenyans who dominate the process, a leading role in the post-peace political formation and direction of the country would cause problems for Sudanese nationalists. He held that Umma leader Sadig Al-Mahdi's call for a post-IGAD all-party constitutional conference was not in principle different from bringing the same forces together under the auspices of IGAD.

Dr. Akol maintained that although expanding the IGAD process could be seen by the mediators and observers as complicating the process, that they would have to agree to this approach if it was accepted by the Sudanese actors.

The link between the peace process and democracy

Dr. Akol said that during the IGAD negotiations the parties were given the options of genuine national elections after 18, 24, or 30 months, with the GoS opting for early elections and the SPLM/A reluctantly accepting the latter option, which was finally agreed to. He was convinced that these elections would be genuinely democratic because first, there was agreement that they would be supervised by the international community; second, they would be held under a government of national unity, and lastly, there would be an independent electoral commission.

Dr. Akol told ASAP that only elections producing a democratic based government could ensure the sustainability of the peace process.

He said that the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party, the leading parties in the north, are both strong proponents of democracy, indeed their only agenda is peace and democracy. And between the major northern parties there were few cultural, religious, or ideological differences. He acknowledged, however, that support for democracy was in the interests of these parties since it was the only means by which they could come to power, given their weak or non-existent military base.

He noted that while the US was a critical component of the peace process, that to date it did not strongly press for a democratic transformation in Sudan and appeared to assume that peace was more important than democracy. Dr. Akol drew attention to the fact that Senator Danforth in his report to the US President, did not once refer to democracy. However, he felt that the US would not oppose strong Sudanese sentiments in favour of democracy. He said that US influence was limited to their power over the negotiating parties, and not over the Sudanese people.

Regarding the Cairo Declaration of the SPLM/A, Umma Party, and DUP

By this agreement [recently signed in Cairo between the leaders of the SPLM/A, Umma Party, and DUP] Dr. John Garang was reaching beyond the ruling National Congress Party to reach out to the northern

opposition and this was a very significant development nationally, according to Dr. Akol.

Dr. Akol noted that the Cairo Declaration caused considerable anguish in the GoS, which fears being isolated in the rapidly changing political environment. He said that recent government accusations that the Declaration called for a sharia-free Khartoum was not accurate and that the National Congress was only raising this issue to present itself as the defender of sharia and Islam. In fact the Cairo Declaration called for religious equality, which was in any case acknowledged in Article 24 of the present national constitution.

Dr. Akol told ASAP that Dr. Garang had misconceptions about Imam Sadig, but he was the leader of a major political party and had to be dealt with. He further said that under Sadig the Umma Party had taken a clear stance on the right of the Southern Sudanese to self-determination and this served to ease outstanding tensions between the two leaders.

Although holding that Sadig and the Umma Party had larger constituencies than the DUP, Dr. Akol held that the perpetually divided Unionists should not be discounted and that their leader, Osman Al-Mirghani was a force of unity in the party. Faced with an election the DUP's various factions would likely come together under Mirghani and that break-away groups like that of Al-Hindi, which is currently aligned with the government, would either rejoin the mainstream or join the National Congress Party.

Dr. Akol held that Mubarak Al-Fadl Al-Mahdi, who led a breakaway group from the Umma Party last year and joined the GoS had no future. And because it had no agenda other than acquiring positions of power many of its members were likely to join the ruling party, or return to the Umma Party.

Regarding the 'new forces' in Sudanese political life

The new forces, which have largely arisen among the most marginalized sections of Sudan, are changing the country's political landscape. Dr. Akol noted that the term 'new forces' was first popularized by Sadig Al-Mahdi in 1965 when he was new to the political scene and was seeking allies of various fringe groups. That alliance did take form between a section of the Umma Party and the

marginalized groups, but he was doubtful that experience could be repeated in the present context.

While in the only recent past, the Umma Party could count on virtual guaranteed support from the west, and the DUP from the east, now this support was very much open to question. He entirely discounted the possibility – raised by Sadig Al-Mahdi in a recent interview given to ASAP – of an Umma Party majority government following democratic elections.

Dr. Lam Akol told ASAP that in past elections the south could gather at most 1/3 of the vote, but with the addition of the increasingly conscious marginalized groups collectively they could be expected to play a major role in any election.

He held that a major obstacle to the realization of a sustainable Sudanese democracy was the weakness of existing political parties and in particular their lack of internal democracy. All of the parties needed a transitional period to organize themselves and make the necessary changes. However, Dr. Akol argued for an election to be held within two years, rather than the 30 months agreed to by the GoS and SPLM/A.

He drew attention to the military achievements of the Darfur-based Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) in such a short time, and said these achievements could not have taken place without a strong political base and this was changing the country's political landscape. He considered the SLA a force to be reckoned with and said that even some National Congress MPs from Darfur are sympathetic to its cause.

While he did not think the SLA had support outside western Sudanese, he noted that people from that region live in significant numbers throughout the north and figure highly in the army. Moreover, these developments have caused consternation among many northern political forces, and particularly the Umma Party which traditionally had a large basis of support in the area.

Dr. Lam Akol thought that had the SLA led insurrection taken place a year earlier that the course of the IGAD negotiations would have been different. He noted, however, that Dr. John Garang has pointedly said that the SPLM/A will not fight people fighting for their rights, a clear reference to the unfolding situation in Darfur.

Dr. Akol told ASAP that the Beja Congress was strengthening its political base in eastern Sudan and noted that the party has been represented in every Constituent Assembly since it was formed in the late 1950s. He held that the armed struggle the movement has conducted in recent years has served to shift support and he did not think the Beja people could be relied upon to vote for the DUP as many had done in the past.

The need for South-South reconciliation

Dr. Lam Akol said that South-South reconciliation should be the major concern of all southerners. He noted that most of the fighting currently going on in south Sudan was between the SPLM/A and the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF) and that every effort must be made to reconcile these two groups. Such differences can be readily exploited and threaten the prospects of peace.

Much of the problem of disunity could be attributed to the narrowness of the IGAD peace process, which excluded other southern political groups. While he did not press for the direct participation of the various southern groups in the negotiations at this stage, he wanted the ideas of a wider spectrum to be considered. Indeed, he felt that most of the ideas that underpinned the Machakos Process had been developed outside the process. He was particularly emphatic that negotiations on the security arrangements embrace other groups.

Dr. Akol said that there were no major differences in the approach to peace between the SPLM/A and the SSDF, or the other major southern forces, and he anticipated that most southern groups could be reconciled and united over the course of the transitional period. He was convinced that southerners of all political persuasions supported reconciliation, and that included Dr. Garang and the SPLM/A.

Dr. Akol said that his SPLM-United was working closely with the SSDF on a joint platform of reconciliation, but he did not expect the two parties to merge at this time, something which is being seriously considered by Dr. Michael Wal Duany of the South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM).

