

Re: Civil Society Participation in Doha Peace Talks
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From: Sivan Abdulrahman

On November 17th 2009 the Doha ‘civil’ society conference was held, addressing several key issues such as; land and natural resources; power sharing; economic and social development; justice and reconciliation; and security arrangements. The Doha Declaration was seen as a decisive step towards consolidating peace and incorporating civil society in the deliberation process. However, suggestions that many groups may have been precluded from the deliberation process have raised questions about just how representative the Doha conference truly was.

The security situation in Darfur runs to the heart of such preclusion. The very notion of civil society under the permanent application of Emergency Law is, at best, problematic. Civil society involvement in the Doha peace-talks has, therefore, been both necessarily limited and met with scepticism by the people of Darfur.¹ Aside from the limitations of Emergency Law, the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) has been accused of taking an active and violent role in the suppression of civil society. As recently as February, the Sudan Tribune released an article detailing NCP orchestrated “killings of hundreds of innocent civilians, looting of properties and massive displacement.”² It is argued that the NCP has a vested interest in maintaining Darfur’s chaotic conditions, in order to “limit the room for an opposition [political and/or military] to emerge.”³ Valid or not, it is certain that the security conditions in Darfur have served to undermine Doha’s success. According to Abdellatif Abdelrahman of the Sudan Tribune, even though the civil society conference represents a step in the right direction, as a function of such limitations, “the masses [in Darfur] have totally rejected it.”⁴

Alongside such historical barriers, difficulty finding genuine and credible primary source material detailing the makeup of the supposed civil society groups that attended the meetings has shrouded the conference with an element of mystery and claims of lacking transparency. According to the Sudan Tribune, 170 groups participated in “a bid to associate them in the ongoing efforts to end the six year armed conflict in western Sudan.”⁵ Nevertheless, according to UNAMID, civil society representatives present in Doha were, in fact, selected “in consultation with the government.”⁶ Such consultative measures have resulted in the NCP’s unilateral and strategic determining of the forum’s composition, and have leant to the perception of Doha as a failure from the outset. Without sufficient representation, not only has the civil society

¹ Abdelrahman, Abdellatif. “Darfur NCP Civil Society groups to Where?” Sudan Tribune. Thursday Dec. 31st, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33638>.

² Kabiir, Omer. “Sudan’s NCP Policies of Divide and Rule in Darfur.” Sudan Tribune. Thursday, Feb. 11th, 2010. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article34095>.

³ “AU Chief Urges Active Role of Darfur’s Civil Society in Peace Process.” Xinhua News Agency. Nov. 19th, 2009. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-11/19/content_12486857.htm.

⁴ Abdelrahman, Abdellatif. “Darfur NCP Civil Society groups to Where?” Sudan Tribune. Thursday Dec. 31st, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33638>.

⁵ “Darfur Civil Society Meeting Kicks off in Doha.” Sudan Tribune. Wednesday Nov. 18th, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33155>.

⁶ Hamilton, Bec. “Who, Exactly, Represented Darfuris in Doha?” Wordpress. Nov. 23rd, 2009. <http://bechamilton.com/?p=1544>.

conference failed to produce real and substantive solutions, it has been rejected by Darfur as a tool through which the NCP has sought legitimacy on the international stage.

It is, nevertheless, difficult to empirically quantify the extent to which the NCP have been able to manipulate the Doha process. While one UN official observed that “90% of the participants of the Doha Civil Society conference [were] NCP members,”⁷ other estimates from a variety of sources describe the meetings as consisting of 170 total participants (as opposed to the aforementioned *groups*), only half of whom represent NCP members.⁸ According to the Sudan Tribune, while “the delegates of the conference represent local NGO’s, native administration, internally displaced people, women, youth, experts and facilitators,”⁹ a large portion of these delegates were NCP members and perpetrators of war crimes. Regardless of the actual numbers, the actions of the NCP remain relatively controversial. Until the NCP chooses to act in an entirely transparent fashion, firmly establishing the selection procedure and formal process of the meetings and making such information easily available to the general public, the Doha conference will continue to be mired in confusion.

The declaration stemming from the civil society conference is another sticking point for cynics, many of whom doubt its being implemented, let alone respected, by either the government or armed forces. The document, which contains “visions and recommendations of civil society on important issues,”¹⁰ and aims “to achieve and build just and sustainable peace in Darfur,”¹¹ focuses upon “the role of [engaging] civil society in all stages of the peace process.”¹² The Declaration details six key areas for future negotiation procedures, including; (1) security arrangements and disarmament; (2) wealth sharing and economic and social development; (3) power sharing; (4) justice, reconciliation and return; (5) land and nomadic routes issues, and; (6) the role of civil society in Darfur peace process.¹³ According to Ali Dinar of the Sudan Tribune, while it is inaccurate to describe the conference as being orchestrated purely by the government, there remains “no absolute promise, [...] from the government of Sudan or from the armed movements that they will adopt these recommendations in future negotiations.”¹⁴

While it is difficult to quantify the level of government interference in the conference, the Sudan Times has argued that the potential of the conference remains, largely, in the hands of the

⁷ Hamilton, Bec. “Who, Exactly, Represented Darfuris in Doha?” Wordpress. Nov. 23rd, 2009. <http://bechamilton.com/?p=1544>.

⁸ Hamilton, Bec. “Who, Exactly, Represented Darfuris in Doha?” Wordpress. Nov. 23rd, 2009. <http://bechamilton.com/?p=1544>.

⁹ Ali-Dinar, Ali B. “Contextualizing the Doha Meeting: The Process and the Declaration.” Sudan Tribune. Thursday, Dec. 3rd, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33323>.

¹⁰ “Doha Declaration – Rough Translation” Doha, Nov. 20th, 2009. <http://www.darfurinfo.org/doha-english-rough.pdf>.

¹¹ “Doha Declaration – Rough Translation” Doha, Nov. 20th, 2009. <http://www.darfurinfo.org/doha-english-rough.pdf>.

¹² “Doha Declaration – Rough Translation” Doha, Nov. 20th, 2009. <http://www.darfurinfo.org/doha-english-rough.pdf>.

¹³ Ali-Dinar, Ali B. “Contextualizing the Doha Meeting: The Process and the Declaration.” Sudan Tribune. Thursday, Dec. 3rd, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33323>.

¹⁴ Ali-Dinar, Ali B. “Contextualizing the Doha Meeting: The Process and the Declaration.” Sudan Tribune. Thursday, Dec. 3rd, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33323>.

(NCP) government and “not in the hands of those who made it [the Declaration].”¹⁵ Any adequate solution to a conflict which has engulfed the population of the region, Al Dinar continues, requires that “civilians in the conflict zone must be heard and their participation must be considered.”¹⁶ Ultimately, the role that civil society must play as a legitimating voice to any peace-talk solutions cannot be underestimated. While UNAMID peacekeepers are presently patrolling conflict-affected areas, in an effort to diminish both violence and unrest, they alone cannot provide a peaceful space between society and the state in which civil society can flourish, and hope to take part in key note conferences, such as Doha.¹⁷ Foreign powers must play a greater role in ensuring equal and accessible participation by civil society, by calling upon the NCP to loosen their authoritative grip on the region, both militarily and politically, and demanding transparency in NCP conduct.

In response to the conference, numerous individuals and organizations have stepped out to critique the limitations in civil society representation. After interviewing hundreds of Darfur’s refugees, Julie Flint of Human Rights Watch suggested that the lack of transparency surrounding the process has allowed for the NCP to manipulate the conference to its own advantage. She notes that in the months prior to, and those following the conference’s opening, organizers of Mo Ibrahim’s Mandate Darfur were told that anyone attempting join the civil society conference would be arrested and tried for treason.¹⁸ Following her interviews, Flint postulated a number of pivotal questions such as, were the pastoralists satisfied with their representation and input (nomadic and farming communities are central to the identity of Darfur)?¹⁹ How was the Declaration agreed upon? Moreover, did the government in any way prevent the ability of delegates to attend the conference?²⁰ It is unlikely that the answers to these questions will come easily, due in large part to the total lack of transparency which has surrounded both the meetings and the actions of the NCP. Nevertheless, Flint concluded her research by noting that what was especially striking about the Declaration was its failure to mention the International Court and Omar Al-Bashir’s war crimes, an absence she attributes largely to the composition of the delegation.²¹

Numerous other organizations voiced their concerns regarding the under-representation of civil society, considered by some to be an inherent characteristic of the Doha conference. The Darfur Union in the Netherlands, the Darfur Woman’s group in the U.S., the Darfur Association in Belgium, and the Darfur Solidarity Group of South Africa all expressed apprehension at the

¹⁵ Ali-Dinar, Ali B. “Contextualizing the Doha Meeting: The Process and the Declaration.” Sudan Tribune. Thursday, Dec. 3rd, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33323>.

¹⁶ Ali-Dinar, Ali B. “Contextualizing the Doha Meeting: The Process and the Declaration.” Sudan Tribune. Thursday, Dec. 3rd, 2009. <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article33323>.

¹⁷ “UNAMID Concludes Special Patrol to Conflict-Affected Areas”. UNAMID. Feb. 10th, 2010. <http://unamid.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=888&ctl=Details&mid=1062&ItemID=7789>.

¹⁸ Flint, Julie. (2009, December 4). “Civil Society and Doha” in *Making Sense of Sudan*. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/sudan/2009/12/04/civil-society-and-doha/>.

¹⁹ Hayward, Susan. (2008, February). “Engaging the Darfur Diaspora for Peace” in *The United States Institute for Peace*. <http://www.usip.org/resources/engaging-darfur-diaspora-peace>.

²⁰ Flint, Julie. (2009, December 4). “Civil Society and Doha” in *Making Sense of Sudan*. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/sudan/2009/12/04/civil-society-and-doha/>.

²¹ Flint, Julie. (2009, December 4). “Civil Society and Doha” in *Making Sense of Sudan*. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/sudan/2009/12/04/civil-society-and-doha/>.

under representation of refugees, Darfur's Diaspora and IDP's. Rather, they argued, there was an overwhelming presence of those who committed war crimes.²² A statement released by The Sudan Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) reiterated such claims, lambasting the lack of any meaningful presence of Darfurian IDP's, refugees or people of the Diaspora²³.

Two further limitations with the Doha process have been outlined by JEM. Firstly, they argue that the conference failed to adequately define the term "civil society" and to delineate all those who should be included in it. Secondly, JEM argue that neither the NCP, nor the Doha talks defined a clear role for civil society in either Darfur, or in future peace-talks. In a country which ranks amongst the lowest on scales of political freedom,²⁴ a problem underlined in Darfur by the permanent application of Emergency Laws, the ambiguity of civil society is overwhelmingly apparent. It remains to be seen whether the belated inclusion of the SLA Abdel Wahid, who, although initially abstaining from peace-talks have recently agreed to join a new round of negotiations scheduled for February 22nd, will boost pressure on the NCP to open up civil society relations and discussions with rapidity and transparency.²⁵

Whatever the ambiguities surrounding Darfur's civil society, its role in peace building must not be underestimated, lest not forgotten. In her book "Strategic Peace building," Lisa Schirch emphasises that a focus on local capacities for peace is an important and vital first step in the peace building process. It is only at a local level, she argues, that people can create roadmaps for their future²⁶. Susan Hayward, author of "Engaging the Darfur Diaspora for Peace" similarly reminds us that engagement with grassroots communities is the only way to ensure that appropriate policies are created to address the needs of those most affected²⁷. These necessary imperatives were not satisfactorily addressed at the Doha conference. While the civil society conference at Doha undeniably represents a step in the right direction, a culture of just peace will remain unattainable so long as local communities are prevented from assembling, prevented from being heard and excluded from forums such as Doha.

As Schirch states, "relationships are at the heart of governance and policymaking"²⁸. Unless to the NCP, for whatever reasoning, takes it upon itself to salvage its relations with civil society, and reverse the systematic exclusion of major actors from further discussions, Doha will continue marred by cynics who feel it undermines those it should be seeking to serve.

²² "Darfur Daily News" (2010, January 18). "Participation at Upcoming Civil Society Consultation".
<http://darfurdaily.blogspot.com/>.

²³ "Doha Civil Society Declaration on Darfur- A Statement from the JEM" Dec., 2009.
<http://www.sudanjem.com/2009/archives/21725/en/>.

²⁴ "Freedom in the World- Sudan" (2010, January). <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15>.

²⁵ "Sudan Peace Talks Unlikely." Jan. 21st, 2010.
http://www.news24.com/Content/Africa/News/965/bd7196649d704934a0a71794f4d62b01/21-01-2010-12-15/Sudan_peace_talks_unlikely.

²⁶ Schirch, Lisa. (2004). *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding*. Good Books.

²⁷ Hayward, Susan. (2008, February). "Engaging the Darfur Diaspora for Peace" in *The United States Institute for Peace*. <http://www.usip.org/resources/engaging-darfur-diaspora-peace>.

²⁸ Schirch, Lisa. (2004). *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding*. Good Books