After a long period without progress in the talks between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), four factors came together from 1997 onwards to encourage the parties to return to the negotiating table. Firstly, people recognized that there was a stalemate following the major offensive operations of 1995-96, in which the SPLM/A recaptured a number of government-held areas. As it became clear that neither side would gain a decisive victory, the door to the negotiation process started to come back into view. Secondly, there was a substantial change of personnel in Khartoum; with few of the previous negotiators remaining, there was a knock at that door. Thirdly, mounting international pressure forced the door to be unlocked, if not opened: this began with pressure from the African states, especially President Obasanjo of Nigeria from 1999; pressure from Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) states followed as the Kenyans appointed General Sumbeiywo in 2001 and the IGAD group was reinvigorated; and finally came pressure from the US Congress, whose representatives sympathized with what they saw as Dr John Garang’s struggle against the forceful spread of Islam. Ultimately, Dr John always had in the back of his mind the notion that a negotiated settlement would be the only way to end the war. He had expected the door to negotiations to be available and so was not surprised when it started to open.

Although IGAD was a regional body not normally mandated or equipped to run a mediation process, the two parties were persuaded to accept its mediation because it had a clear incentive to see a peaceful solution in Sudan, as well as enjoying the full support of the international community. Also, IGAD recognized the limitations of its size and experience and welcomed international support in the form of the IGAD Partners’ Forum (Italy, Norway, the UK and the USA). This reassured both sides that the process would be taken seriously and properly funded, unlike the recent Abuja process for Darfur.

The USA in particular was important in garnering international support for the mediation process and in demonstrating its commitment to the negotiations in a number of ways. John Garang’s campaign for a secular southern Sudan in which religion would be a matter of private preference rather than an imposition of the state resonated with US liberals, while their religious radicals were keen to avoid the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Special Envoy John Danforth’s initiative was a further guarantee that the US would not lose interest after the initial Machakos Protocol had been signed.
Self-determination

By 1994 the government in Khartoum felt sufficiently established to consider ways of ending the civil war, but it was also entrenched in its attitudes, particularly its ideological use of religion for political gain. As a result, the 1994 IGADD Declaration of Principles (DoP) was not signed by the government and was unable to address the root causes of the conflict or end hostilities. If anything, Khartoum’s failure to demonstrate any change of attitude towards the south intensified the conflict. The DoP was further undermined by the 1997 Khartoum Peace Agreement, a hollow document signed by splinter groups but not by the main force in the south.

Self-determination was a central issue in negotiating the DoP. The reaction of Khartoum to this question was in some ways surprising and surprised, because they had until then taken for granted the Sudanese nation’s identity and integrity. The GoS had not expected it to be such an important issue for the southern Sudanese, so it did not seem to the government the concession that it now appears. Of course, Khartoum may have had no intention of adhering to the principles outlined in the DoP. Indeed, self-determination was not as important in the mid-1990s to the southern Sudanese as it is now. The southern states found their identity through their local tribal communities; their collective identity as southern Sudanese was to some extent a reflection of Garang’s charisma but was also in large part thrust upon them by generations of economic, cultural and political neglect by Khartoum. Nowadays if you ask any southern Sudanese what the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) means for them self-determination is almost the only point to which they refer, and many people on both sides think that southern Sudan will be independent regardless of any attempts by either side to make unity attractive.

The length of the interim period may affect the aspiration for independence. Initially it was scheduled to last only for 18 months – in which case southern Sudan might by now already be independent. But this was changed to 6½ years because both sides wanted to make sure that the option of unity had been given time to prove itself. Many southerners’ response to independence is largely an emotional one, and it was felt that there needed to be time to allow the referendum to have a practical, economic, technical, infrastructural, political and socio-cultural rather than an emotional basis.

Personalities

The personal commitment of those involved in bringing to fruition the Machakos Protocol was at least as important as the more publicised personal rapport between the two principals in the later negotiations. It was this commitment which pushed the parties to build on the momentum of Machakos and which led to the first meeting between, at a ceremony in Kampala, of SPLM/A Chairman John Garang and Sudanese President al-Bashir, when each side was able to give assurance of its serious commitment. Later on, the personal rapport between Garang and Taha was indeed to become important, but this would have had no opportunity to develop and mature if it had not been for the willingness of personalities on both sides to invest their time and energy in the process. And the rapport itself was boosted both by Taha’s political popularity and preparedness to take the risk of talking seriously with the southerners, and by Garang’s presence, charisma and maturity to bring back into the SPLM fold those who had been outside.

Throughout the process the personal commitment of General Sumbeiywo was also important in different ways. As talks unfolded it became clear that both parties needed a serious team of committed negotiators together with strong internal leadership, a clear mandate and fair external mediation; it was at times when these criteria were not met that the negotiations failed.

Conclusion

Getting to and from Machakos took a long time. As well as providing pressure, the international community and the mediation team gave space to the parties and accepted that resolution would be neither easy nor swift. The parties also accepted that Machakos – even though it was signed some twenty years after the conflict had reigned and thirty years after the Addis Ababa Agreement – marked not the end of the process but the beginning of the serious, detailed negotiations.