A framework peace agreement between the Khartoum regime and the Darfur-based Justice and Equality (JEM) rebel movement was sealed unexpectedly in Qatar in late February 2010. This outcome carries important implications for the future of Darfur, Sudan and the wider region. But the deal’s implementation already faces difficulties, as Khartoum engages in combat against another rebel group which rejects the agreement and the JEM is suspected of prioritising its own interests above peace in Darfur. The longer-term prospect for Darfur remains in the balance.

The seven-year conflict in Sudan’s western province of Darfur reached what many hoped would be a crucial stage at the end of February 2010, when the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Khartoum regime reached a framework peace agreement in talks mediated by Chad and Qatar. The outcome came as a surprise to most observers, which only added to the air of optimism when the deal was signed in Qatar’s capital Doha. Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, hailed the result as “the beginning of the end of the war in Darfur”. The JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim was more cautious, emphasising that this was a preliminary agreement and not a final breakthrough.1

1 This article is a revised and updated version of an op-ed that was published in the Norwegian daily Klassekampen on 4 March 2010.

Jacob Høigilt is a Middle East researcher at the Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies, Oslo. He holds a PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies from the University of Oslo. His research interests focus on ideological currents in the Arab world and their discourses, with special regard to Islamism. He is currently engaged in a Noref-sponsored project on Egypt and self-determination for the southern Sudan. Among his most recent publications are Raising Extremists? Islamism and Education in the Palestinian Territories, Fafo-report 2010:05, and “Darfur and Arab Public Opinion: Strategies for Engagement”, FRIDE/Noref, 2010.
If Omar al-Bashir’s prediction proves correct, it would be good news for Darfur’s 1.2 million internally displaced people in particular and for the people of Sudan in general. But there have been many dashed hopes and missed chances during this destructive conflict. What political causes and interests are at stake in this latest effort, and how will they affect the chances of a lasting peace?

The immediate interests served by the framework agreement are those of the two signatories. The hard-pressed Khartoum regime secures a ceasefire, and timely political breathing space, as it struggles to pull through the presidential and parliamentary elections that are currently taking place amid much controversy. The JEM is guaranteed representation within the Sudanese government, which means that Darfur will be accorded a higher priority and more economic resources at the top political level; in principle this would end the situation where Darfur has been neglected, exploited and misruled ever since Sudan gained independence in 1956. The JEM’s forces are also meant to be integrated into the Sudanese army.

But if momentum is to be sustained following the agreement, the deal’s implications for three vital issues need to be addressed: the future of Darfur itself, the referendum on independence for southern Sudan due in 2011, and regional rivalries between Sudan and its neighbours. The domestic situation of Sudan after the election of the country’s president and national assembly on 11 April will also alter the political calculations surrounding the agreement.

The politics over Darfur

It is important to recall that this is not the first time Khartoum has made a deal with a Darfur-based rebel group. In 2006, a controversial talks-process in Abuja, Nigeria, led Minni Minnawi of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) to sign an agreement with Khartoum that gave him a position in the Sudanese government. At the time, however, Minnawi’s star as rebel leader was already in decline, and the deal he embraced was rejected by two major groups: the Justice and Equality Movement and the SLA faction led by Abdul Wahid al-Nur. As a result, and amid continued violence in Darfur, Minnawi was reduced to a front-man for the Khartoum regime without any real power.

It is unlikely that the latest agreement will see the repeat of such a scenario. JEM is a strong formation, not least because it has been supported by Chad: in 2008, it carried out a spectacular attack on Omdurman, Khartoum’s twin city on the other bank of the Nile. At the same time, from his Paris exile Abdul Wahid al-Nur – whose SLA commands a lot of support in Darfur’s refugee camps – has criticised the Khartoum-JEM deal as a sham which has no chance of improving Darfur’s wretched humanitarian and social conditions. Indeed, only if the agreement leads to a true amelioration of these conditions will this stance lose its force.

The opening of this new line of division between Darfur’s rebel elements offers a tempting opportunity for the Khartoum regime to engage in another round of divide-and-rule politics, where it seeks to buy off one group while engaging another in combat (as in its recent fierce fighting with rebels loyal to Abdul Wahid in the Jebel Marra district). The JEM has warned against such breaches of the truce, and it is uncertain how long JEM leaders can remain passive while government troops are taking civilian lives in districts supporting Abdul Wahid. The Sudanese government is notorious for seeking to foment division among internal opponents, other states and international organisations. This time, however, far more than the stability of Darfur is at risk.

The southern and regional questions

Sudan may soon be partitioned. In 2011, the population of south Sudan will vote on whether to separate from the north. They are expected to say “yes”. At best the referendum process will be long and tortuous, involving tough negotiations and intransigent – but not insuperable – demands from...
both sides. At worst it could lead to a renewal of civil war. Whatever the outcome, it means a lot to the regime that the situation in Darfur is by that stage peaceful and stable. For in that case, Khartoum will avoid feeling threatened on two fronts and thus experience less pressure from international actors. In turn, regional and international organisations engaged in the delicate north-south negotiations will be relieved to concentrate on just one main issue.

The uncertainty over Sudan’s constitutional future is linked to the regional implications of the Doha agreement. The deal was in fact mediated by Chad’s president, Idriss Déby, in the Chadian capital N’Djamena before it was formally signed in Qatar. This explains the surprise that accompanied it, for Chad and Sudan have spent the past six years in bitter strife, doing their best to destabilise each other. Whatever Déby’s motives in now improving relations with Sudan, the result is to put to rest (perhaps temporarily) a long-lasting regional conflict.

In the larger context of Sudan’s domestic and regional situation, therefore, a lot depends on the Khartoum-JEM agreement being able to lead to a lasting settlement. This makes the events of March 2010 all the more disturbing. A new faction among the rebel movements, led by Darfur’s former governor al-Tijani Sese, has emerged; this, the Liberation and Justice Movement, is negotiating with Khartoum a “framework agreement” corresponding to that between the JEM and the regime. The JEM protests that it is the only body with authority to negotiate with Khartoum, and has as a result frozen further talks on implementing the Doha deal. Currently, the parties have reported that further talks are postponed until after the elections in April, and it remains to be seen whether and when they will start again.

The shadow game
Developments since the agreement between the Sudanese government and the Justice and Equality Movement was signed raise two suspicions. The first is that Khartoum is, true to its divide-and-rule instincts, attempting to draw out the peace process while it suppresses Abdul Wahid’s SLA in Jebel Marra. The second is that Khalil Ibrahim and his JEM are seeking primarily to gain more power for themselves rather than peace in Darfur. The danger then is that the framework agreement between the JEM and Khartoum – instead of being a watershed opportunity to bring peace and more human security to the people of Darfur – will be stillborn. The game being played by the leading political actors makes the hope of Doha look slim indeed.