



In brief: Sudan – another rocky period as southern independence approaches

Standard Note: SN/IA/5843

Last updated: 18 May 2011

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South Sudan's referendum took place between 9 and 15 January 2011. The voting, with the exception of a few instances of violence in some border areas, went smoothly. Southerners voted overwhelmingly (99%) for secession. Fears that the North would find a way to prevent or destabilise the referendum were ultimately unfounded. The US has sought to sweeten the pill by promising a reward if the North allows the South to secede smoothly –for example, the withdrawal of Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. This might provide some breathing space for the National Congress Party, which will form the government of the North post-secession. 'Ultras' within the regime have accused President al-Bashir and the current leadership of losing the South. There are [deep divisions](#) within the ruling party. Opposition parties have sought to mobilise in the North against the NCP, emboldened by events in the Arab World, but so far to relatively little effect.

Bashir has indicated that he will not stand again at the end of his current term in office. He will undoubtedly be hoping that his reward for compliance with southern secession might include a deferral, potentially indefinitely, of the genocide and war crimes charges against him in connection with the conflict in Darfur (see below). The UN Security Council has the power to do this under the terms of the Rome Statute. Human rights groups within Africa and beyond will be campaigning for the International Criminal Court (ICC) process to continue without unwelcome 'political interference'.

South Sudan, as the new state will be called, is expected formally to achieve independent statehood on 9 July 2011, the day that the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement expires. However, the fact that the referendum proceeded successfully does not mean that the North-South dispute has been conclusively resolved. There was supposed to be a referendum in the oil-rich border region of Abyei at the same time to decide whether the region would go with the North or the South. However, in December it was postponed, with the NCP and Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) agreeing, amidst international pressure to do so, to embark on high-level negotiations to try and work out a mutually acceptable way ahead. No visible progress has been made. On the ground in Abyei there have been growing clashes between Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) cadres, local police units and the nomadic Missiriya, who have agitated to be allowed a vote in any referendum despite the fact that their opponents view them as Northerners who cross into the South seasonally with their cattle. Most Ngok Dinka, who are predominantly sedentary agriculturalists strongly committed to joining the South, feel cheated out of their referendum and accuse the North of giving military backing to the Missiriya. South Sudan's draft interim constitution states that Abyei is part of the South. The North has recently resurrected its earlier bellicose rhetoric on the issue

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and revived threats that it will not recognise southern independence. A few weeks ago, UN peacekeepers came under attack there. Some analysts believe that Abyei is [“on the brink of a dangerous new conflict”](#).

More broadly, a new deal on how to share oil revenues has also yet to be agreed. Progress in demarcating the North-South border has also remained painfully slow. Some in the North continue to accuse the South of supporting anti-government armed groups in Darfur. There is also the issue of who will in future be liable for Sudan’s enormous foreign debt (\$39 billion at the last count), with Southerners arguing it none of it should fall to them. North and South have joined together to call for debt relief on the full amount. There remain other potential sources of further turbulence. The people of Blue Nile State and South Kordofan State have been promised ‘popular consultations’ about their future governance under the CPA. The process is under way in the first, but is yet to get going in the second due to the levels of insecurity there. There are many in both states who also feel they have been cheated out of a proper choice between North and South. A few days ago, the NCP incumbent, Ahmed Harun, indicted by the ICC for alleged war crimes in Darfur, won delayed elections in South Kordofan. The SPLM has refused to accept the result, alleging fraud.

Those suspicious of the North’s intentions speculate that any of the above issues could yet provide an alibi for a ‘withdrawal of cooperation’ over the process of separation, although some counter that North and South are so interdependent over oil (the South has most of the oil, but the north has the pipelines) that last-minute deals (the only kind that Sudanese negotiators do) will probably be reached.

The South will continue to face its own internal challenges. Several ex-SPLM leaders have gone their own way and have been at loggerheads with their former party. [Suppressed grievances](#) are already surfacing. There are many armed groups still at large; hundreds of thousands of Southerners are returning from the North, some reportedly facing attacks on the way, and will need services and other support on arrival; prices have been rocketing; and there will be the challenge of new elections scheduled for 2012. The Government in the capital, Juba, may want to reduce currently high levels of military expenditure but the uncertain security situation is far from conducive to doing so. All in all, the euphoria of independence, in what will remain for some time to come a heavily ‘donor reliant’ state, could be short-lived. Indeed, for some southerners it has worn off before the great day has arrived.

Then, crucially, there is Darfur, which has rather dropped off the international radar screen over the past year. Some expect that the example of what has happened in South Sudan will also mobilise opinion in Darfur in support of the independence option. The internationally-sponsored Darfur peace process, which has been hosted by Qatar, limps on inconclusively. The largest armed opposition group operating in Darfur, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), has rejoined the peace talks but they remain deadlocked. One sticking point has been a rebel demand to create a permanent Vice-Presidential position for Darfur and establish a single region-wide autonomous authority. Earlier this month, the Government instead announced that Darfur would be divided into five states, up from the current three. Rebels denounced the move. There have been numerous clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces and anti-government armed groups over recent months, with government airstrikes in South Darfur in the last day or so. Darfur could yet become a terrain for a proxy conflict between North and South if outstanding issues are not resolved to their mutual satisfaction.

Further reading: Latest [Rift Valley Institute](#) reports; [Statement by Sudan Troika](#) (US, UK and Norway) on recent developments in Sudan, 10 May 2011; April blog post in *The Guardian* by [Andrew Mitchell](#) et al; BBC [maps](#); latest [reports](#) on Darfur (14 April) and Sudan (12 April) by the UN Secretary General.