

Sudan's Secession Crisis

Can the South Part From the North Without War?

Andrew S. Natsios and Michael Abramowitz

Under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the 2005 deal that ended the lengthy civil war between the north and the south of Sudan, voters in the south are supposed to vote on January 9, 2011, to decide whether their region should secede and form the world's newest country. The civil war, which lasted 22 years and during which an estimated 2.5 million southerners died, was fought over several issues: the central government's long-standing neglect of Sudan's periphery; the excessive concentration of jobs, wealth, and public services in the region known as the Arab triangle, along the northern part of the Nile River valley; the government's brutal attempts to impose Arab culture and Islam on the south, where Christianity and traditional religions prevail; its persistent refusal to grant the south any autonomy (except for a brief period in the 1970s); and its exploitation of the south's resources,

particularly its oil, to fill government coffers. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which was signed by Omar al-Bashir, the president of Sudan, and John Garang, the leader of the southern rebellion, who was killed in a helicopter crash soon after the deal, was intended to correct some of these problems. It gave the south its own semiautonomous government and an independent standing army and required the upcoming referendum on secession. But now Khartoum's stalling tactics are threatening to delay the vote, with potentially disastrous consequences.

During a visit to southern Sudan in late September and early October, we met nearly 100 people, including the south's president, Salva Kiir Mayardit, and vice president, Riek Machar, civil-society groups, church leaders, international humanitarian workers, UN officials, and many others. We traveled outside Juba

ANDREW S. NATSIOS, U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan in 2006–7, is Distinguished Professor in the Practice of Diplomacy at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, and the author of the forthcoming book *Sudan and Darfur: What Everyone Needs to Know*. MICHAEL ABRAMOWITZ, a former *Washington Post* reporter and national editor, is Director of the Committee on Conscience at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

to the southern cities of Malakal and Rumbek but were denied permission to travel to the north. In the course of our conversations, we came to see clearly that Garang's vision of a unified, democratic Sudan died with him. Given the depredations and atrocities that the southern Sudanese have suffered for two centuries at the hands of the northern Arabs, getting southerners to vote for unity would have been difficult even with Garang in power. One cause of the ongoing tensions is the condescending attitudes of some Arab elites in Khartoum: they continue to refer to the southerners as *a'bid*, the Arabic term for low-caste black slaves. For them, the south's revolt during the civil war was no liberation struggle; it was an uprising of slaves that needed to be crushed. Now, these northerners cannot abide dealing with southerners as equals. The southerners, for their part, wish to be rid of the Arabs and Islamism once and for all.

In the fall, as the date of the referendum neared, international observers and southern officials reported that Khartoum was redeploying its army, with newly purchased heavy weaponry, along the disputed north-south border. In response to the north's muscle-flexing, the southern government, which is based in the city of Juba, sent the toughest units in its own armed forces, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and also equipped them with new heavy weaponry. The south's leaders threatened to issue a unilateral declaration of independence if the north manipulated or canceled the vote. They also privately warned that if the north attempted to occupy the oil fields in the south—where 80 percent of the country's known oil reserves are located—they would destroy the country's oil infrastructure. And they

have the troops and the weapons to do so. If Khartoum thinks it can protect Sudan's oil infrastructure, it should reflect on the failure of the U.S. military to protect Iraq's during its occupation of that country.

Some balloting will likely take place in early 2011, but if the north tries to manipulate the referendum or postpone it by more than a few weeks, the south could erupt. Stonewalling might even precipitate war—and perhaps a war even bloodier than the north-south conflict or the rebellion in Darfur, where the government troops' scorched-earth tactics left a lasting imprint of misery, displacement, ongoing violence, and atrocities. On the other hand, the path to a peaceful partition as provided for by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement is full of dangers, not all of which are adequately recognized in the West. The peace deal calls for a six-month period of transition after the scheduled date for the referendum, during which the north and the south are supposed to work out any remaining details about their split. According to many people we spoke to in the south, it is during this time that the threat of violence will be the greatest—either because the vote has been held, in which case the international community is likely to turn its focus elsewhere, or because the vote has been delayed by the north's dilatory tactics and violence has broken out.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Even though they signed the peace deal nearly six years ago, Khartoum and Juba only recently began serious negotiations over their divorce settlement. As we were writing this article last November, many of the thorniest questions were still unresolved. Where should the north-south border be

Sudan's Secession Crisis

drawn? How will the citizenship of southerners living in the north and of Arabs living in the south be established? How should the dispute over the oil-rich area of Abyei, which straddles the current, tentative border, be settled? How should the country's debts be apportioned? How much oil revenue should Juba give Khartoum for the construction of the north's oil pipeline and port and the south's use of them? And how much water from the Nile River, which flows from the south, will the north (and Egypt) be allowed to use? To gauge the difficulty of working out any one of these matters, just consider the question of how oil revenues should be distributed. Under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the two sides were supposed to split the proceeds evenly. Will that arrangement continue even though the south, where most of the resources are, thinks that the north's leaders have cheated it out of billions of dollars?

The Bashir government believes that the way these issues are resolved will determine whether its party, the National Congress Party (NCP), remains in power. And the south's leaders are wary of compromising the long-term development of their region by granting the north too many concessions. Khartoum wants to negotiate the terms of any divorce before the referendum—one reason it is trying to delay the vote—but Juba is refusing to settle until after the ballot for fear that Khartoum might hold the vote hostage to these questions. With the parties' strategies clashing, negotiators are at an impasse. The south did win a symbolic victory last September, when during a high-level summit at the United Nations in New York virtually the entire international community lined up behind the south and insisted

that the referendum be held on time. But the government in Khartoum is not budging, worried that it might be signing its own death warrant if it fulfills the final terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

Some Sudan observers fear that if the south secedes, the world's newest country will be born a failed state. UN officials in the country distribute to visitors a fact sheet entitled "Scary Statistics" showing that southern Sudan's health and education indicators are extremely poor, even compared to other troubled states in Africa. But those who focus on such data overlook the fact that the south has effectively been a functioning state for the last five years and that it has made remarkable progress under very difficult circumstances. During our trip, we found Juba to be unexpectedly vibrant. Since 2005, the city's population has grown from roughly 100,000 to roughly 1.1 million (which is about 13 percent of the south's entire population). A dozen government ministries and offices and the University of Juba, which were wrecked by the war, have been rebuilt. Major city streets have been paved and are lined with a new electrical system, and 7,000 new businesses have been registered, including eight banks, seven water-bottling plants, and a brewery. There were only three hotels and two restaurants in 2007; there are now 175 small hotels and dozens of restaurants. Some 300,000 southerners have cell phones. There is a serious shortage of trained teachers, but encouragingly, school attendance has increased fourfold.

The south still faces serious challenges. In 2009, there was an upsurge of violence in the south, the root causes of which were historic rivalries among the region's 50 tribes. This fractiousness has long

been the south's greatest weakness, and successive governments in the north have exploited it, arming one tribe to attack another, in order to keep the south divided. But some international officials we met in Juba said that the latest bout of violence was due not to any shortcomings on the southern government's part but to failed harvests and the suspension of salaries to southern militias on the SPLA's payroll— itself the result of a large drop in oil revenues after the 2008 financial crisis. The government in Juba is already functioning as a state, and it is likely to continue to do so as long as a new war does not break out and its oil fields keep producing revenues.

That said, a new South Sudan would surely be a fragile state. Although the south's elite is very able and bright, it consists of a few hundred senior officials at most, and the large state bureaucracy beneath them is short on skills and managerial experience. The rural areas of the south know little of the prosperity now evident in Juba; whether a new state could spread these benefits more equitably will determine its viability over the long term. Opposition leaders in the south also complained to us that the SPLA used heavy-handed tactics to force some 20 independent tribal militias—the source of 80 percent of the violence in rural areas, according to a senior UN official—to give up their small arms.

Judging from our interviews, however, the south's ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, and Kiir, its leader, appear to be genuinely popular among the southern people. (Kiir won 93 percent of the vote when he was up for reelection as the south's president in April 2010.) Still, the south's leaders will have to be careful that their new country is launched on a

genuinely open and democratic path. In the long run, they will also have to ensure that oil and mineral revenues do not corrupt their political culture or get misused, diverted, or distributed unevenly.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

The north has its share of challenges, too. It already is a fragile state, and it may be approaching state failure. The NCP's traditional means of exercising control—brutally repressing the opposition, turning its adversaries against one another, using oil revenues to buy off opponents—no longer work. Khartoum has lost control of southern Sudan, faces nonstop rebellion in Darfur, and could soon confront uprisings in the Nuba Mountains, at the center of the country, and, in the east, from the Beja people of the Red Sea Province and the Funj people of Blue Nile, El Gezira, and Sennar Provinces. Bashir's NCP knows that its authority is slipping away; it is circling its tattered and rickety wagons to maintain state power in the Arab triangle, an area it believes is more secure and whose inhabitants it takes to be more loyal to Arab interests. During the past three years, the north's leaders have canceled large-scale development projects in the El Gezira and Sennar regions and moved their investments in dams, irrigation schemes, roads, and bridges to the Arab triangle. Now, many opponents of the Bashir government in the north fear that it will impose even more repressive measures and after the referendum abrogate the national constitution in order to prevent the dissolution of the country.

Khartoum is increasingly coming under pressure from all sides. Bashir has been indicted for genocide by the International Criminal Court for the atrocities committed

Sudan's Secession Crisis

in Darfur, and in the fall of 2010, he and his colleagues came under assault from politicians and the press for having ever agreed to hold the referendum on secession. When Bashir consented to peace with the south in 2005, he was acting under duress: the national army was losing the war to the rebels, casualties were rising, and the war had grown unpopular in the north—all of which was exacerbating the country's chronic economic problems. Bashir's government also feared the military power it saw the United States exercising in Afghanistan and Iraq. But a deal that may have made sense then appears now to have come at too high a cost, at least to some Arab nationalists and Islamist groups in Khartoum. If the south does secede, Khartoum will have to negotiate to get access to the region's natural wealth: not only its vast oil reserves but also mineral resources in the region—gold, diamonds, copper, and coltan—that have yet to be fully explored, the plentiful water from the Nile River watershed and the Sudd marshlands, the region's luxuriant soil, and its thousands of square miles of open range with the greatest concentration of cattle per capita in sub-Saharan Africa. A growing chorus of Bashir's opponents in Khartoum are asking what the north has received for making peace with the south.

In late 2010, newspapers in the north were making vitriolic attacks on the referendum. Some are allied with the Islamist Hassan al-Turabi, a former ally of Bashir's—Turabi helped Bashir seize power in a coup in 1989—who is now his archenemy. The Bashir government, which is already accustomed to repressing the regime's more liberal opponents, moved to close some of the newspapers. Concerned

about Islamists, it reviews all the sermons prepared for Friday prayers in mosques looking for incendiary language.

The NCP is essentially worried that it could be deposed by political upheaval in Khartoum—for instance, a military coup, a conspiracy in the dreaded National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), a popular uprising, or the mobilization of a rebel movement from outside Khartoum—before, during, or after the referendum. The most likely beneficiary of any such coup would be Turabi or other Islamists. Turabi, who is in his late 70s, is the only opposition figure with both an extensive political organization, including networks of fanatically loyal followers in the military and security apparatus, and a serious grudge against Bashir and the NCP, which expelled him from the party, removed him as Speaker of the National Assembly in 1999, and has jailed him repeatedly for criticizing the regime. Until his falling-out with Bashir, Turabi had dominated the regime from behind the scenes. In his heyday, he brought Osama bin Laden to live and work in Sudan—the two are related by marriage—and invited numerous violent Islamist groups to locate their headquarters and training camps in the country. He supported multiple rebellions against moderate Arab regimes and even orchestrated the attempted assassination of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995. In his fiery sermons, Turabi has called for a worldwide Islamist revolution that would start in Sudan and spread throughout Africa. Were the government of Sudan to fall to him or one of the Islamist factions he has inspired, its first action would likely be to abrogate the north-south peace agreement; for them, the south would be an ideal base from which

to spread their Islamist movement to the rest of Africa.

The NCP is understandably nervous; the threat from Turabi and the Islamists is real. Turabi is suspected, for example, of plotting the overthrow of the government with Khalil Ibrahim, a rebel leader from Darfur. Ibrahim, once a radical follower of Turabi (whom he has called his godfather), has since tried to distance himself from him—Turabi is radioactive politically—but many Sudan watchers suspect that their friendship endures. In May 2008, Ibrahim led 130 heavily armed trucks with 2,000 troops across 700 miles of desert from the Chadian border all the way to Khartoum. Fighting its way through the city, the force made it as far as a bridge close to the presidential palace, where it was turned back by troops from the NISS. The northern army, which had been given orders to stop the rebels, refused to intervene. Many of the well-connected southerners to whom we spoke in the fall were certain that Turabi and Ibrahim had planned the attack on Khartoum together. Apparently, so was Bashir: he had Turabi arrested the day after the incident and publicly accused him of being involved. The attack was the first time in over three decades that street fighting had occurred in Khartoum, and it is the closest the Bashir government has come to being deposed during its reign of more than two decades.

The response by the government was swift and severe, according to human rights reports. It executed dozens of the rebel soldiers its troops had captured. It purged the army of hundreds of suspected Turabi loyalists and Darfur officers. (Historically, Darfur was the main recruitment ground for the Sudanese army, but by

2008, many Darfur soldiers had grown furious about the atrocities that Khartoum's forces had committed in their home province.) The government also began building a network of underground weapons caches and safe houses throughout Khartoum in order to defend the city street by street should another attack take place. It moved all but 4,000 of the most loyal soldiers out of the capital for fear of a coup. And Bashir placed the army under the effective control of the NISS.

The episode underscored the Byzantine nature of politics in the north, which are opaque even to longtime Sudan analysts. Bashir and his government could almost certainly be convicted of serious crimes, responsible as they are for massive suffering among civilians in the south and Darfur. Yet Bashir is also the man who signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and he may be one of the few politicians in Khartoum willing to fulfill its final provisions. It is theoretically possible that if he were suddenly to depart from the scene, he would be succeeded by a more humane, enlightened government; however, many observers we spoke to believe that a new regime would probably be worse. Even if a decent government were to take power instead, the centrifugal forces pulling Sudan apart today are accelerating at such a rapid rate that following the south's likely secession, the eventual dissolution of the remaining north Sudanese state might be inevitable.

ON THE BRINK

All-out war is, of course, the gravest danger facing Sudan, especially for civilians and ethnic groups such as the Beja, the Dinka, the Funj, the Nuba, and the Nuer, all of which have been targeted by Khartoum

and its allied militias in the past. It is unlikely, however, that either Bashir or Kiir would ignite a new conflict. Both are military officers who know the cost of war—unlike some of the militant Islamists who are demanding blood but have never heard a shot fired. Bashir might also fear that his army would not fight: Khartoum's soldiers have been demoralized by repeated purges, some have grudges against the government for its actions in Darfur, and many do not understand anymore why they are fighting.

The greater risk comes from rogue commanders. Under one scenario, Turabists in the army might try to depose Bashir and the NCP before, during, or soon after the referendum. This would almost certainly mean war. The south has a large standing army and will not tolerate any interference in its secession. On this question, all the tribes in the south are united; they have long sought independence from Khartoum. However unlikely it would be to attempt to invade the south with ground forces, a successor government in Khartoum might well use the country's new air force to bomb the region. The SPLA would probably be outgunned by the north's superior weapons, but its soldiers would be highly motivated: once more, they would be fighting to protect their families and their farms from the north's aggression.

War would also endanger the one million southerners who are still internally displaced around Khartoum and other northern cities—one and a half million have already returned to the south—as well as members of the Funj, the Nuba, and other African Muslim tribes who are similarly displaced. Since Sudan's independence from the United Kingdom in 1956, successive governments in the north

have feared these people. When Garang returned to Khartoum after signing the peace agreement in 2005, he was greeted by a jubilant crowd of two, some say three, million people. After he died in a helicopter crash that summer, southerners who thought the accident was an assassination by the NISS rioted and burned down parts of the city. (No evidence incriminating the service has surfaced yet.) In both instances, the authorities lost control of Khartoum, and they remain terrified of the displaced population. Last fall, the minister of information and the minister of foreign affairs announced that if the south voted to secede, southerners living in Khartoum would lose their right to get a job, conduct financial transactions, obtain medicine, and even buy food. Bashir was quick to rebut these claims and said that the government would protect all southerners living in the north. But if war broke out and the southern army advanced toward Khartoum, the NISS might well begin targeting southerners living in the north. Northern officials have reportedly mapped out the locations of all the settlements of internally displaced people in Khartoum and bought hand guns for mass distribution to the Arab population.

MUTUAL ASSURED DEPENDENCE

Although the international community must continue to make clear to both the north and the south that resorting to violence or attacking civilians is unacceptable, its efforts to encourage a resolution of the impasse in Sudan will not be decisive: both sides know their own interests well and are skilled at negotiations. The southern Sudanese we spoke to dismissed as ineffectual the threat of applying new economic

sanctions against the north if it does not cooperate. They believe that Khartoum, regardless of who is in charge, will be deterred from aggression only by military force, either by the SPLA or by the U.S. Air Force. Inducements on the part of the Obama administration to encourage the north to compromise—for example, removing Sudan from the list of states sponsoring terrorism, normalizing diplomatic relations, lifting economic sanctions—would provide ammunition to Bashir against critics of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. But because the Bashir government is fighting for its survival, any outside pressure short of military force is unlikely to change its fundamental calculations.

For all their differences, the north and the south will remain dependent on each other after the referendum, if only because both need oil revenues. And so one way to avert violence might be to encourage the two sides to cooperate in the name of their economic codependence. The vast majority of Sudan's oil reserves may be in the south, but most of the infrastructure necessary to export that oil—pipelines and a port—are in the north. Thus, without cooperation between the north and the south, oil revenues could quickly dry up for both. Any new pipeline running from the south through either Ethiopia or Kenya is a decade and billions of dollars away. Meanwhile, some energy experts predict that Sudan's oil production may peak and then decline over the next decade. (The government in Juba, 98 percent of whose revenue comes from oil, is now racing to get international mining companies into the south to explore its mineral resources and thus help the government diversify its sources of revenue.) If oil

revenues precipitously decline because of a war or a political crisis between the north and the south, Khartoum and Juba would have to lay off their huge public-sector work forces, which would destabilize both governments over time. And thanks to corruption, the elites in both capitals have personally profited from the oil revenues. In other words, maintaining oil revenues is in the interests of many parties—and thus a powerful incentive to find a peaceful way out of the current impasse.

Given these stakes, the Sudanese, in both the north and the south, might very well manage on their own and do once more what they have done over the past six years: pull back from the brink of catastrophe, averting the worst violence, and patch together an inadequate but functional compromise that protects both parties' interests. Considering the circumstances today, Sudan could do a lot worse. 🌍

Reprinted by permission of FOREIGN AFFAIRS, January/February. Copyright 2011 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc. www.foreignaffairs.com