

# Understanding the Implications of South Sudan's Independence

Written by Harry Verhoeven

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HARRY VERHOEVEN, JUL 13 2011

*"Power is like a stick. Someone will hit you on the head with it if you put it down"*  
Dinka tribal chief in Abyei, a disputed region between North and South

On Saturday 9 July 2011, one third of the territory of what was formerly the largest and perhaps most diverse country in Africa seceded to become an independent state. The birth of South Sudan ends a six year interim period that began with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005, which followed a series of brutal civil wars that claimed the lives of millions, mostly in Central and Southern Sudan. Media reports abound highlighting the excitement on the streets of Juba, the capital of Africa's 54<sup>th</sup> country; Southerners breathe a sigh of relief now that they finally feel able to control their own destinies, free from the Khartoum elites that have long been associated with authoritarian rule, ethno-religious chauvinism and underdevelopment. Yet will their dreams of democracy, justice and prosperity be realized?

To understand the challenges ahead for South Sudan, it is important to remember the tormented history of state building in this country the size of half of Western Europe. Historically dominated by a patchwork of pastoralist groups and sedentary cultivators, the Ottoman-Egyptian invasion of Sudan in 1821 had disastrous consequences for the peoples of the South. Regions like Bahr al-Ghazal and Equatoria were sucked into a violent international political economy that was built to help Muhammad Ali's Egypt rise to great power status. Southern Sudanese labour lay at the heart of the slave trade in North-East Africa that underpinned the expansion of the Egyptian state and economy. Most raiding was carried out by foreign adventurers, Northern Sudanese traders and (forcibly recruited) Southern muscle. Racial stereotypes and dubious religious invocations –Southern Sudan as "*dar al-harb*", thus controversially giving an Islamic justification to the trade- were developed to legitimise the systematic depopulation of tens of thousands of square kilometres and the associated large scale famines that sowed terror across the South until the 1920s.

The association of the state with 'trouble' for local populations continued after Sudan became independent in 1956. Under British colonial rule, the peoples of North and South had been segregated through the notorious "Southern Policy" which was meant to block processes of assimilation, but widened the gap in political and economic power between Khartoum and the peripheries. Unsurprisingly, it was the elites from the Nile River Valley, who collaborated with the colonial authorities and were well acquainted with modern education and commerce, who were best placed to capture the state. Southern demands for autonomy were ignored and dissent was violently crushed, leading to the Anyanya rebellion in the South between 1955 and 1972 and later to the uprising by the Sudan's People Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) which waged war from 1983 to 2005. Thus, the consolidation of the Sudanese state, whether foreign controlled or with local elites at the helm, has always been associated in the South with the deployment of brute force and the destruction, not expansion, of livelihood options. At independence, South Sudan will officially be one of the world's poorest countries.

It is important to point out that these violent processes of state building and extraction of resources were by no means only experienced by Southerners: people in Darfur, the centre of Sudan (Kordofan), the East (Blue Nile, Beja territory) and even the High North (Nubia) have suffered from the same combination of political-economic

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marginalisation and socio-cultural discrimination. To illustrate the absurd and violent realities on the ground take the example of a local village leader close to the North-South border; I asked him what "the state" meant to him:

"The State? Once every two years two people from Khartoum come to our place. One of them is a tax collector who asks us to pay- only Allah knows for what, we don't have electricity, a school, a health care centre or even a dirt road. The second is an army officer who comes for our sons, recruiting them into the military to fight the SPLA/M. That's the extent to which the State is interested in us."

These policies, in the South and elsewhere in Sudan, have been intensified by the regime has been in power since 1989. Sudan, together with Iran and Afghanistan, is one of three states that underwent an "Islamic Revolution" when army generals and Islamists united to defeat the SPLA/M challenge, rescue the Sudanese economy and introduce a strict form of Sharia. The *Al-Ingaz* (Salvation) regime has further deepened the inequities that are the root cause of endemic civil war, not least through declaring its counter-insurgency a jihad and widespread violence against 'deviant' Muslims and non-believers in conflict zones.

The 2005 peace agreement was intended to fundamentally reverse these dynamics of violence and exclusion and offer all Sudanese a place in a united, democratic and federal Sudan, with Islamic Law for the North of the country and secularism in the South. It was an internationally brokered package deal with many drawbacks, but it offered numerous options for a genuine transformation of the state, including wealth sharing, power sharing and democratic elections. The hope generated by the CPA was symbolised by the return of SPLA/M-leader Dr John Garang de Mabior to Khartoum after 22 years in the bush, where he was greeted by an ecstatic crowds of millions of ordinary people in July 2005. Garang, though originally a Southerner, was not a secessionist, but a passionate believer in a New Sudan, a home for all its citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, gender or socio-economic background. He argued that the problems faced by the South were fundamentally no different than the sufferings of people across the country at the hands of the Khartoum elite. However, one week after his triumphant visit to Khartoum, the SPLA/M chairman died in a mysterious helicopter crash, leaving his former bush commanders in charge of an autonomous Southern Sudan.

When negotiating the CPA, Garang had insisted on a right to self-determination for the South, a last resort for the devastated region if a united, democratic Sudan proved to be impossible. While implementing the peace agreement would have been tricky even with Garang around, there can be little question that his death was a tremendous blow to the idea of a New Sudan. An implicit carve-up ensued with the military-Islamist regime in Khartoum focused on administering the North (and claiming to have preserved its 'Islamic identity'), with the SPLA/M leadership embracing the secessionist sentiments of its militants and investing little time in the possibility of unifying Sudan's divided and marginalised people. The (not so democratic) general elections of April 2010 resulted in overwhelming majorities for the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) in the North and the SPLA/M in the South, through a mix of intimidation of opponents, machine politics and incumbency advantages. It came as a surprise to no one that the January 2011 referendum in South Sudan pointed to separation: nobody had tried to make unity attractive.

The six year interim period between beginning and end of the CPA brought neither democracy and unity, nor justice and prosperity for most of Sudan's people. Oil-driven economic growth led to local booms in Khartoum and Juba, but was not used to address the fundamental inequalities that had plunged Sudan into decades of war. Post-conflict reconciliation and an end to the impunity for human rights violations were not part of the agenda of NCP and SPLA/M. Above all perhaps, the central Sudanese state remains deeply authoritarian, focused on resource extraction and locked in a violent relationship with the peoples of the peripheries.

Worryingly, secession is unlikely to lead to a very different kind of state in South Sudan. Following the controversial elections, increasing intolerance for critical media and growing corruption scandals, fears are emerging that SPLA/M-controlled Juba will be a new Khartoum: centralising; repressive; and uninterested in the plight of ordinary pastoralists and cultivators who try to survive in a tough environment. The SPLA/M itself is deeply divided, due to clashing ethno-regional affiliations and personal antagonisms that are likely to deepen as the movement's leaders compete over the spoils of independence. President Salva Kiir and Vice-President Riek Machar, friends-turned-enemies who reconciled a couple of years ago, urgently need to find ways of uniting Southerners behind an inspiring

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vision beyond the notion of a common enemy in Khartoum.

The South will face an uphill battle to bring all the freedoms and public goods that its people deserve after decades –centuries- of violence and marginalisation. There is a worryingly long list of reasons to be pessimistic about the near future, including a multitude of unsettled issues with the North (sharing of oil and water, the disputed Abyei border region, currency arrangements, etc.), intra-Southern tribalism, unresolved legacies of the war and the night-total absence of physical infrastructure and human capital in South Sudan.

This is where the international community can play a limited but vital role. Economically, helping to build all-weather roads, setting up health care facilities and expanding the electricity grid are crucial, as is support for South Sudan's great potential in agriculture and animal husbandry; politically, the SPLA/M should be pressured to allow maximal political space, tackle sprawling corruption and decentralise power from Juba. The real grievances underpinning the chronic insecurity and multiple uprisings across the South should be engaged with, even if Khartoum-backed spoilers like warlord Peter Gadet should be confronted. Finally, the international community should make political, technical and financial resources available for a South-South dialogue in the new country, which ought to include transitional justice arrangements. It is an oft-forgotten reality that most of the two million victims of the war were Southerners killed by other Southerners (sometimes in the pay of Khartoum, sometimes not), a bitter legacy that people need to talk about and come to terms with.

Doubt and bitterness prevail amongst many non-Southern Sudanese on the eve of independence, but history is not destiny. The question is no longer whether secession should have happened or not; it is how the marginalised people of North and South can finally get on with their lives, instead of being sucked into open wars and micro-conflicts. Amidst the euphoria on the streets of Juba and the cynicism of the pundits, it is realistic but ambitious ways forward that should be thought of. The people of South Sudan will need more than just our prayers for the foreseeable future.

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