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Sudan After the Referendum

By Greg Mills & Terence McNamee

Synopsis

Although the January 2011 referendum in southern Sudan will inevitably confirm that the South wishes to secede from the North, stark challenges face the two new states. If not managed carefully, renewed north-south and/or intra-south conflict could break out along Sudan's myriad faultlines.

Commentary

IN THE enigmatic figure of Riek Machar you can observe many of the divisions which one day could imperil the new state of Southern Sudan, should its people choose to secede from the North – as everyone expects – in a referendum beginning on Sunday, 9 January 2011. On the desk of the rebel warlord turned vice-president in the southern capital of Juba was an 'African Bible' in English, a Bible in Arabic, and a Quran. A Nuer, in a state where the Dinka tribe is dominant, Machar is viewed as a leader-in-waiting by many in the south, although within the autonomous Government of South Sudan (GoSS) he is treated with suspicion due to his past alliances with Khartoum. Machar has two wives -- an American aid worker and a local politician. His urbane manner and designer clothes stand in sharp contrast to his countrymen clustered outside his office, wearing traditional garb, their ethnic origins clearly distinguishable by horizontal tribal markings across their foreheads.

Complex Faultlines

Sudan is riven with faultlines – ethnic, religious, cultural, urban versus rural, nomadic versus pastoral – which exist between and within the North and South. These divisions pre-date Sudan's independence in 1956 but were exacerbated and enunciated by the civil war – Africa's longest – which raged for most of the country's history. The more intractable cleavages will not be resolved by a decision on separate statehood. Independence could even create flashpoints of conflict along emergent faultlines.

Southern Sudan is one of the poorest and least developed parts of the least developed continent on earth. More than 90% of its inhabitants live on less than a dollar a day and nearly half require food aid. The territory is landlocked; an appalling road network leads to its major port in Mombasa, Kenya. At the time of the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, there were just four kilometers of paved roads in southern Sudan, an area roughly the size of Texas. There are still none in some southern states, such as Jonglei. "There has been no development in South Sudan – everything is at zero," decried GoSS President Salva Kiir recently. "Secession is favoured by South Sudanese because the state has been built around excluding them Khartoum has failed to build a state to manage our diversity. In this sense the [current] Sudanese state is a failed state," according to another senior GoSS minister.

Secession might now be inevitable, but sharp disagreements persist between North and South on touchstone issues such as border demarcation, the status of the oil-rich Abyei region and the sharing of oil revenues, which account for about 95% of the south's annual income and 50% of the north's.

The African Union (AU) and the wider international community are deeply concerned that failure to resolve any one of these disputes could re-ignite a north-south war. Equally worrying is the spectre of renewed violence within the south. The region has been scarred by chronic instability and tribal conflict, which owes some of its fervour to the colonial native administration which hardened lines between historically fluid groups, such as the Nuer and Dinka, so that they became increasingly 'ethnicised'.

Economic Remedy

Yet, as in most societies that have struggled to contain simmering faultlines, the main driver of conflict in Sudan has been economic and political marginalisation; ethnicity and tribe are the backcloth to what is essentially a story of iniquitous development. The danger in the south is that new grievances might emerge after secession if power and resources are unfairly distributed across groups or regions.

Mindful of these dangers, in a recent Brenthurst Foundation study on Sudan, we concluded that policymakers in the South will have to focus on the twin priorities of taxation and private sector development – especially in the potentially rich agriculture sector, on which 80 per cent of the population are dependent – rather than compete for flows of aid money, currently amounting to around half of the government's own budget.

Today Southern Sudan spends nearly half of its US\$2.3 billion budget on defence, both to guard against any Northern aggression and to keep its own various militias paid. A significant re-balancing of this massive expenditure on defence with other priorities is essential.

Paradoxically, the North may emerge stronger after secession, without the drain of war and the weighty international stigma gained by their repression of the South. Yet no one can safely predict how northerners will react to losing one-third of their territory and one-quarter of their economy, particularly while the insurgency in the Darfur region of western Sudan still rumbles on.

Implications for Asia

The best antidote against renewed conflict is greater economic interdependence. A common currency, soft borders for trade and people flows, and co-management of the White Nile and oil pipeline would reinforce North-South links. Means to formalise these ties might include a customs union; increased cross-border infrastructure; and new politico-economic structures for 'joint administration' of specific resources and interests.

The long-beleaguered South has much of the world's sympathy. Nevertheless, Sudan's inevitable breakup is causing jitters in African capitals and further afield. The oft-heard mantra is that it would open Pandora's Box of separatist claims elsewhere in the continent, from Senegal to Somalia.

Indeed the referendum may prompt a wider reconsideration of the relationship between faultlines and borders in other parts of the world, notably Asia. How many viable nations without states exist within Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Myanmar and so on? And who are the rightful arbiters of their fate? There are no easy answers but one thing is for certain: they will be watching what happens next in Sudan.

Greg Mills and Terence McNamee are, respectively, Director and Deputy Director of the Johannesburg-based Brenthurst Foundation. Both were recently in Sudan and are contributing authors of the Brenthurst Foundation report "‘Everything is at zero’: Beyond the Referendum – Drivers and Choices for Development in Southern Sudan".