

# Sudan: Why the people of the south voted for independence

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January 27, 2011 - Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal/Green Left Weekly — Sudan's British colonial rulers laid the foundations for half a century of post-independence conflict and inequality in the south. The British occupiers consciously fostered a divide between the mostly Muslim, Arabic-speaking north and the south, where most practised indigenous religions. Development of institutions and services was focused on the north, including a well-resourced education system, while the south was neglected and education left to Christian missionaries.

Prior to its departure from Sudan, Britain oversaw the imposition of the Arabic language and Islam on the people of the south, which continued after Sudan's independence in 1956. In the first north-south civil war from 1955 to 1972, as many as half a million people died before limited autonomy was granted to the south, which failed to bring much-needed economic development.

In 1983, Sudan's President Gafaar al Nimeiri reignited the civil war after revoking the south's autonomy. The same year, sharia law was brutally enforced throughout the whole of Sudan.

## **John Garang and the SPLM/A**

It was at this time that a group of soldiers in the southern army rebelled, led by John Garang. Out of this rebellion Garang founded the SPLM/A, which fought for genuine autonomy and economic development for the south under a democratic and secular federal system.

Following a mass uprising in the north against fuel and food price rises in 1985, Nimeri was ousted and democratic elections were held. However the new so-called democratic government, led by the Umma Party's Sadiq al Mahdi, continued both the war on the south and the implementation of sharia law. In 1988, 250,000 people in the south died in a war-induced famine after Mahdi blocked food aid to the south. The war escalated as the northern army wiped out whole villages, burning crops and displacing the vast majority of the population.

Before a new round of peace talks could commence, current president Omer al Bashir seized power in a 1989 military coup backed by the fundamentalist National Islamic Front. A new dictatorship was quickly imposed with severe restrictions on all democratic rights. The war on the south was rigorously pursued.

Despite efforts by Khartoum to foster divisions within the SPLM/A, the movement maintained its strong support among the southern population, and in collaboration with the National Democratic

Alliance (comprised of the major northern opposition forces) proved too strong to be crushed by the northern army.

When the CPA was finally signed in January 2005, a “government of national unity” was formed and the newly autonomous south was to be allocated half of the revenue from oil production, which is mostly based in the south. Garang became vice-president of Sudan and president of the south, until he was killed in a helicopter crash in July 2005. His death sparked bloody riots in Khartoum by southerners who suspected Garang had been murdered by the regime.

Salva Kiir Mayardit was appointed to Garang’s positions and calm was restored, yet the NCP’s commitment to the peace deal quickly proved token. SPLM representatives who took up government positions found themselves with little power; the army was in no hurry to withdraw from the south; and oil revenue wasn’t allocated fairly.

National elections held in 2010 — a condition of the CPA — were boycotted by most of the opposition, who accused the NCP of rigging the ballot and suppressing opposition candidates.

The NCP initially disrupted the referendum voter registration process and threatened to prevent the vote from proceeding. However the overwhelming will of the people of the south to separate from the north — coupled with international pressure and the burden on Khartoum of continued conflict in Darfur and other parts of the country — left the regime with little choice but to accept the inevitable outcome of south Sudanese independence.

## **Challenges**

But the extent to which the regime attempts to undermine the new southern state remains to be seen, and the possibility of further violence remains, particularly over the future of the oil-rich border region Abyei. Khartoum has a long history of arming and directing militias in various parts of the south. There are also fears for the rights of southerners who are settled in Khartoum and choose to remain after the division.

The celebrations have already begun in the south in anticipation of the long-awaited end to Khartoum’s brutal rule. There is much hope that after decades of struggle, to which so many gave their lives, the people of south Sudan can finally create a peaceful and prosperous future. However, the challenges will be substantial.

South Sudan will begin its life as one of the poorest and least developed places on the planet. Prolonged war and Khartoum’s policies of neglect mean there is a total lack of infrastructure. A majority of the population does not have access to sanitation and safe drinking water and at least 90% of south Sudanese survive on less than US\$1 a day. One in 10 children die before reaching the age of one, and only a small minority of people finish primary school. An estimated 180,000 southerners returned home in time for the referendum and more are expected to follow, putting further strain on limited resources and food security.

In addition to the unresolved border between the north and south, there are a plethora of controversial issues such as oil revenue division, the massive foreign debt and citizenship rights that Khartoum and the new state must agree on. The NCP’s record does not inspire confidence that it will act in good faith, and the regime is already attempting to extend the “interim period” before South Sudan comes into existence.

While some 80% of oil reserves are located in the south, the pipelines all go through the north,

giving Khartoum greater leverage. A southern pipeline from Juba to Kenya has been proposed, but until that eventuates the south will be dependent on northern pipelines, refineries and ports.

There have been widespread allegations of corruption levelled at the SPLM government since it has ruled the autonomous south. There are concerns that the new south Sudanese elite — dominated by Dinka, the largest ethnic group in the south — will not treat all southerners equally and that historical divisions between communities could result in continued violence if the scarcity of resources is not overcome.

Late last year, police in the southern capital Juba were accused of harassing people on the streets in an attempt to enforce a conservative dress code. Police allegedly attacked women wearing pants and forcibly cut off men's dreadlocks.

## **Oil and Washington**

South Sudan can also expect meddling from the US and other Western powers. Already the south's petroleum ministry reports a flood of interest from oil companies eager to exploit the south's most lucrative resource. The south will also face inevitable pressure from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to gear the economy towards repaying foreign loans rather than meeting the needs of the people.

The US government has been posing as a key player in bringing peace to Sudan, paying lip-service to supporting the south's right to self-determination. Yet history tells a very different story. For decades the US backed Khartoum with no concern for the suffering of the south. During the 1980s the NCP regime received considerable aid from the US including military assistance.

The relationship soured when Khartoum supported Iraq in the Gulf War. In 1993 Sudan was added to the list of state sponsors of terror and in 1997 sanctions were imposed, based on Khartoum's alleged support for terrorism. However seeing opportunities for US oil companies in Sudan, following the 9/11 attacks then US president George Bush suggested that sanctions may be lifted if Khartoum would both cooperate in the US "war on terror" and resolve the conflict with the south. A dependent, impoverished South Sudan and a cooperative NCP regime in Khartoum that can maintain "stability" through continued repression would suit US desires to both promote a significant role for US oil companies and increase US political influence and control in the region.

But despite US manoeuvring, responsibility for the south's imminent secession lies with the millions of south Sudanese eager for self-rule. In a January 11 interview with the Addis Fortune, SPLA chief of staff James Hoth Maito explained that despite the SPLM's vision under Garang of a united, democratic, secular Sudan (a dream shared by people throughout the country who have long suffered under Khartoum's repressive rule), Garang agreed with the inclusion in the CPA of a referendum on self-determination. This was in the hope that Khartoum would effect real change to avoid separation, and because he believed that ultimately the decision on unity or separation had to be made by the people.

In the future, the development of healthy north-south relations will be largely dependent on the success of northern left and democratic forces in replacing the NCP regime.

In the south, independence will open the door to future development of the class struggle. After Khartoum's domination is finally lifted, class divisions within southern Sudanese society will become clearer. The extent to which the expectations of south Sudan's workers and poor are fulfilled will be key to influencing future struggles.

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