

Sudan: War, injustice cause secession

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Celebrations have already begun in the south in anticipation of the long-awaited end to Khartoum's brutal rule.

The January 9-15 referendum on self-determination in south Sudan looks certain to result in the division of Sudan into two countries.

About 96% of the 3.9 million registered voters took part, well exceeding the required 60% turnout.

The final result will be announced in February. But with 80% of the vote counted, the South Sudan Referendum Commission reported a landslide vote of almost 99% in favour of independence.

The Republic of South Sudan is expected to be officially declared in July.

The referendum was mandated by the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The agreement was signed in Naivasha, Kenya by Sudan's National Congress Party (NCP) government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which had led the struggle in the south.

The CPA ended more than two decades of civil war, in which more than 2 million people died.

Sudan's colonial rulers lay 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. The south was neglected and education left to Christian missionaries.

Before Sudanese independence in 1956, Britain imposed the Arabic language and Islam on the people of the south.

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. But this failed to bring much-needed economic development.

In 1983, Sudanese President Gafaar al Nimeiri revoked the south's autonomy and reignited the civil war. The same year, sharia law was brutally enforced throughout Sudan.

In response, a group of soldiers in the southern army rebelled, led by John Garang. The SPLM/A, founded by Garang, fought for genuine autonomy and economic development for the south under a democratic and secular federal system.

Nimeri was ousted in 1985 by a mass uprising in the north against fuel and food price rises. Democratic elections were held.

However, the new government, led by the Umma Party's Sadiq al Mahdi, continued 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. The war escalated as the northern army wiped out whole villages, burned crops and displaced most 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.

The new regime imposed severe restrictions on democratic rights. The war on the south was rigorously pursued.

The SPLM maintained strong support in the south, despite the regime's attempts to divide it. In collaboration with the National Democratic Alliance (made up of the major northern opposition forces), it 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. 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. However, the NCP's commitment to the peace deal quickly proved token.

SPLM representatives in 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 at first disrupted the referendum's 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 south Sudanese independence.

It remains to be seen to what extent Khartoum attempts to undermine the new southern state. The possibility of further violence remains, particularly over the future of the oil-rich border region Abyei.

Khartoum has a long history of arming militias in the south. There are also fears for the rights of southerners living in Khartoum.

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, the people of south Sudan can finally create a peaceful and prosperous future.

However, the challenges are substantial.

South Sudan is 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.

Most of the population does not have access to sanitation and safe drinking water. 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. More are expected to follow, putting further strain on limited resources.

As well as the unresolved border between the north and south, there are many other controversial issues. These include oil revenue division, Sudan's huge 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 to act in good faith. The regime is already attempting to extend the "interim period" before South Sudan comes into existence.

About 80% of oil reserves are located in the south, but the pipelines all go through the north, giving Khartoum greater leverage.

A southern pipeline from Juba to Kenya has been proposed, but for now the south is dependent on northern pipelines, refineries and ports.

There have been widespread allegations of corruption levelled at the SPLM government that ruled the autonomous south. There are also concerns that the new south Sudanese elite — dominated by Dinka, the largest ethnic group in the south — will not treat all southerners equally.

Historical divisions between communities could result in 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.

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 pressure from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to gear the economy towards repaying foreign loans rather than meeting the needs of its people.

The Obama administration 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 south. During the 1980s, the NCP regime received considerable military and other forms of aid from the US.

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, then-US president George Bush suggested after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks that sanctions could be lifted if Khartoum

cooperated in the US “war on terror” and resolved the conflict with the south.

A dependent, impoverished South Sudan and a cooperative NCP regime in Khartoum that maintains “stability” through repression would suit US desires to promote a bigger role for US oil companies and increase its influence in the region.

However, the key reason for the south’s imminent secession lies with the millions of south Sudanese eager for self-rule.

The SPLM’s vision under Garang was for a united, democratic and secular Sudan — a dream shared by people across Sudan sick of Khartoum’s repression.

In a January 11 interview with the Addis Fortune, SPLA chief-of-staff James Hoth Maito explained Garang nonetheless 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 Garang believed that the decision on unity or separation had to be made by the people.

In the future, the development of healthy north-south relations will largely depend on the success of northern 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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P.S.

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