

Referendum in a powder keg: independence for South Sudan

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Sudan, a country situated on the rift that divides Africa's Muslim and Christian religions, is under the shadow of partition through referendum, a process which could deliver the world its newest country no later than January. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is closely monitoring Southern Sudan in case the North boycotts the process and the former declares independence unilaterally, making international intervention needed to avoid retaliatory measures from the northern government. Even though China and Russia's votes on this topic are rather enigmatic, the other permanent members of the UNSC – France, the UK and the US – do not appear to raise seminal issues capable of influencing their voting choices negatively. Much like Portugal, now a non-permanent member of the UNSC, their vote will be cast based on broader conceptions of regional security, preservation of human life and dignity, and upon an assessment of the capability of a potentially independent South Sudan to govern itself and assure statehood to its population. The European Union also has a role to play in the process, which involved sending a mission of 110 observers to verify the validity and credibility of the referendum. Since there has been no increase of peacekeepers in the country, it appears world leaders are confident the referendum will go on without major incidents.

However, there exist several points of tension that if politically exploited are capable of igniting a broader conflict between the North and the South, and serve to demonstrate the many frailties attached to the South's secession.

The topic of partition and rearrangement of borders in Africa is an issue which affects almost all African states. The continent's borders were designed during the colonial period, especially in the Conference of Berlin in 1884/85. By proposing a partition of territory between two culturally different groups, the potential independence of South Sudan will reinforce the precedent opened by Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1993, which meddles with deeply rooted historical events, largely unfamiliar to the newer generations. Although Africa currently does not list any other movements with the capacity to secede from their host countries,¹ the 'peaceful' pluralistic day-to-day life of some of these states² should not be taken for granted in the long term.

While South Sudan enjoys a certain degree of autonomy by having its own legislature, security forces and control over governmental revenues, a separation between the two regions would mainly lead to an increase in the oil revenues that South Sudan receives, consequently lowering profits from oil exploration for the North – which sees more than half of its budget assured this way –, a fact it might not be willing to accept. Yet, the South possesses no infrastructure to sell its oil on the world market, as all

¹ Today there are secessionist movements in Casamance, Senegal, Cabinda, Angola, Zanzibar, Tanzania, Somaliland, Somalia and Western Sahara, Morocco. Yet, none of these groups has managed to secede and most appear to be rather dormant.

² Although Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo still hold remnants of secessionism – in Biafra and Katanga respectively – it is also visible in the Côte d'Ivoire, where apparent ethnic lines – mainly based on wealth and religion – divide the north and the south in support for Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara. However, no claims for power-sharing or territorial partition have been made.



of these are located in the North. It barely has any paved roads, making it impossible for trucks to carry its 'black gold', and there are no pipelines connecting its oil fields to other countries. Hence, the issue of wealth sharing might prove to be difficult to negotiate, and the destiny of Sudanese oil exploration unclear.

South Sudan is currently governed by Salva Kiir Mayardit and the Sudan's People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the political wing of former rebel group Sudan's People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which fought in the second Sudanese civil war against the central government in Khartoum, led among others by current President Omar al-Bashir. Perilously, the territorial division proposed by the referendum runs along the conflict lines of the three-decade-long civil war, a historical fact which weights on the relationship between both players. Due to the heavy militarization of the border, even small skirmishes might trigger a broader conflict, especially around the town of Abyei which will have its own referendum to decide whether or not to stay with the North or join the South. On the other hand, President of Sudan Omar al-Bashir, who has been prosecuted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on five counts of crimes against humanity, two of war crimes and a further three of genocide, has said he would celebrate the result of Sunday's referendum on southern independence, "even if you [they] choose secession". Although South Sudan has enjoyed a comfortable degree of autonomy without major repercussions, the very background of President al-Bashir makes it difficult to believe the process will not be without any incidents.

Finally, despite not being a comprehensive explanation of the issue at hand, the south and the north of Sudan are also divided along cultural, religious, ethnic and historical lines. In fact, most northerners are Arabic-speaking Muslims, while southerners are mainly Christians or follow traditional religions. Yet, an independent South Sudan would not bring about a unified nation-state but rather a conglomerate of different ethnic groups who – each in their own way – associate with a loose definition of South Sudan statehood and society. Hence, nothing guarantees that these ethnic groups can be mobilized to secede from South Sudan and create yet another new state, especially since the southern population hopes that secession will bring about a quick improvement in the quality of life – an expectation present in most secessionist regions, but one the very young and inexperienced South Sudanese government will find impossible to meet.

It is difficult to search for any positive, credible aspects to make one believe the referendum and the potential road to secession will go smoothly and without any bumps. Historically, Sudan has been the stage of one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts of the 20th century, giving its population a specific historical background and a strong argument to secede. Yet, much like the disintegration of the Soviet Union in late 1991 was unexpected, nationalism is often easily identifiable while the exact time of its manifestation is difficult to predict. Although the practice of claiming self-determination is dormant within Africa's colonial frontiers, it would not be wise to expect the continent's manufactured borders to remain unaltered in times to come.

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