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The Next Act in a Long Saga: Southern Sudan to Declare Independence on July 9, 2011

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The first three months of 2011, we have witnessed more change in North Africa and the Middle East than has occurred in decades. Long repressed demands for reform have emerged and have been emboldened by increased coordination of action and a firm resolution of will. Authoritarian leaders who had been largely successful at using tactics such as arrests and violence to control physical dissent are proving incapable of controlling social media such as the internet and cyber speech. This has increased the ability for young people and others to develop networks of coordination and to share information on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to lead their countries on the march towards freedom.

The month-long Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia demonstrated that unrelenting and widespread protests can topple even an entrenched authoritarian leader such as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Likewise, in Egypt, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians poured into the streets in Cairo and Tahrir Square and convinced the military that they would not leave or settle for anything less than the end of the thirty-year Hosni Mubarak regime. The power of these demonstrations and the widespread demands for freedom, meaningful representation, reduced corruption, economic reforms and human rights has resonated across the region.

Many new Tahrir (Liberty) squares have popped up, with non-violent protesters calling for either governmental reforms or removal of regimes in Bahrain, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In Libya, in particular, demands for the removal of the forty-two-year dictator, Muammar Muhammad al-Gaddafi, have escalated into armed conflict. N.A.T.O., with the backing of the Arab League and the U.N. Security Council, is now leading a second military operation outside of Europe to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilian lives.

A common theme among all these events is the call for change and freedom emanating from the streets, from a
diverse cross-section of each society. It is little wonder, considering the context of these historic transitions and tumult, that the story of Southern Sudan’s own decades-long struggle for freedom to shape its own destiny, has not received adequate attention. This is unfortunate, as the successor failure of the soon-to-be world’s newest state will greatly depend on international assistance in overcoming the high costs of secession.

In order to fulfill the aspirations of the people in Southern Sudan, Tunisia, or Egypt and achieve desirable outcomes of political stability and democracy, the international community must remain focused on the long-term needs of these countries in transition.

On January 9, 2011, Sudan, Africa’s largest country by territory, faced a decisive moment after nearly a half a century of fighting over whether the South would secede. Many doubted if the Northern government would ever permit the South to hold a referendum to choose whether or not to remain as part of the state of Sudan. This was because the current President of Sudan is Omar Hassan al-Bashir. He came to power in a bloodless military coup d’État in 1989, and has been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes and genocide committed in the western region of Sudan, Darfur. It was widely known that the likely outcome of the vote would be for the South to break away and declare a new and independent state free of control by the Khartoum government.

The Southern Sudanese did vote overwhelmingly (with 99 percent of the vote) to break away and to shape their own political and economic destiny. The success of this overwhelming declaration of divorce and the upcoming (July) declaration of independence have important implications. They will result in momentous changes to the relations between the different regions of Sudan, giving the South increased political and economic power. They will also have precedent-setting significance for the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, and to others with self-determination disputes far beyond their borders.

Why Would 99% of Southerners Want Independence?

Sudan was an artificially constructed state whose territorial boundaries were drawn by the British, merging together peoples who had been ruled separately under indirect British-Egyptian colonial rule. Historically, the British colonial government largely closed off the southern black African region from the northern Arab region. When Sudan was granted independence, the previously separate regions were merged into one state. This was despite the population’s differences in language, race, religion, and culture. A dominant North–South cleavage emerged out of these contradictions and has been pervasive throughout Sudan’s history. In general, most Northerners are Muslims who speak Arabic, while in the South are mostly Christians or followers of traditional religions and a wide variety of ethnic groups.

Shortly after Sudan declared independence in 1956, the southern region put forth numerous grievances about discrimination based on religion and race. They decried the lack of adequate representation in the political and security systems, the lack of investment in the Southern economy and human rights violations. Many maintained that the North was trying to Arabize and Islamicize the South. In 1963, seven years after independence, these demands escalated into calls for independence and an insurgency turned into a civil
war against the Khartoum government. The strength of the demands by Southerners was matched by the North’s resolve to retain this territory, resulting in a fight over these issues. In 1972, the Addis Ababa Accords ended the war by providing increased autonomy to the South and establishing a regional president.

However, the peace was tenuous and not long-lasting, as the Khartoum government under Jaffer Nimeiri reneged on the peace agreement, declaring Islamic Shari’a as the basis for Sudanese law, and suspending the Regional Assembly in the South. This led to the re-emergence of a second destructive North-South secessionist war in 1983, led by John Garang and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army. After another twenty-two years of conflict, the human losses were over 2 million lives and 4 to 4.5 million people were displaced to other regions in Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and other neighboring countries. The people living in Southern Sudan have largely borne the brunt of decades of war, and the region’s population is only between 7 and 10 million. Even if one excludes the hundreds of thousands killed in the Darfur conflict in the western region, this North-South civil war killed an estimated 5 percent, and displaced 12 percent, of Sudan’s total population of 36 million.

In 2005, Africa’s longest civil war was finally brought to an end with a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and attempts were made at reconciliation between the North and South. This agreement provided a framework for a more equitable distribution of oil wealth. This is significant as oil revenues account for over 90 percent of Sudanese export earnings. The oil reserves are largely located in Southern Sudan. However, the oil is refined in the North and historically this is where the management and investment of revenues largely remained as well.

Beyond revenue sharing, the CPA outlined a more equitable share of political power, such as the creation of local governments and protection of all citizens’ rights. A number of government commissions aimed at dealing with oil disputes, land reforms, corruption and human rights were also created. Most significantly, the CPA explicitly granted the Southern Sudanese people the right to hold a referendum on independence that was to be held six years later, in 2011. The CPA has succeeded in achieving and sustaining relative peace between the North and South, despite the large-scale violence that has occurred in the Darfur region.

The Difficult Road Ahead in Building a New State

The overwhelming passage of the January 9, 2011 independence referendum was a moment of jubilation...
celebrated throughout the South. The upcoming July 2011 declaration of independence promises to fundamentally alter the face of Sudan. However, although the Southerners are at a pivotal moment in their journey to gain political freedom, reveling in the creation of a new flag and national anthem, a number of obstacles and uncertainties remain to be resolved. The first major point of contention involves the disputed oil-rich and cattle grazing lands in the Abyei region. Made up primarily of Ngok Dinkas – Southerners – it was widely expected that they would vote in their own referendum to join with the South. However, the Khartoum government did not allow their referendum to take place and has indicated that it is unwilling to relinquish their hold over this territory. This refusal to honor the terms of the 2005 CPA is a clear indication of the potential problems of credibility between the two parties in negotiating and upholding agreements.

Other outstanding post-referendum economic issues that remain to be settled include the division of oil revenues, the delineation of assets and tens of billions of dollars in debt liabilities. Finally, another set of contentious issues involves the final demarcation of borders, the determination of citizenship (many Southerners were displaced to the North due to the war) and security arrangements. Clearly, this is a process fraught with peril and the costs of transition are going to be high. The potential for violence is also high, as we could see when hundreds of people were killed in recent clashes in contested areas in the South. The Upper Nile’s capital, Malakal, was recently attacked by militia thought to be proxy forces of the North in an effort to overthrow the Southern government prior to the independence deadline. The violence has caused Southern leaders to suspend negotiation talks and accuse Bashir and his National Congress Party of making war against them. Thus, the final question remains: although the Southerners have achieved a milestone victory, what will a post-independence Southern Sudan look like? Will the newborn state be viable or become a failed state? One major obstacle is that the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) leaders are not experienced politicians, but largely former rebels who rose to power as part of the fight for independence. Greatly complicating efforts at providing good governance through the creation of mechanisms of accountability is that Southern Sudan has among the world’s highest rates of poverty. According to a recent joint World Bank–United Nations Development Program (UNDP) mission, an incredible 90 per cent of the people in the South live below the poverty line of less than $1 US a day. Paved roads are lacking, and there is very little in the way of transportation or health infrastructure. Developing these capabilities in the capital of Juba and beyond will be difficult after decades of war and neglect. These and many other formidable challenges remain to be faced in order to achieve the birth of a new and viable state.

Why the International Community Should Not Lose Sight of Sudan

Despite the short-term spotlight of modern parachute journalism, it is imperative that the international community look beyond the initial celebration of newfound freedoms to the enormous long-term needs of the Southern Sudanese people. One notable initiative was a human rights monitoring project initiated by actor and anti-genocide activist George Clooney. The Satellite Sentinel Project uses commercial satellites and Google map technology to act as paparazzi, photographing the violent events and displacement occurring on the ground in Sudan. After the referendum, for example, the satellite images confirmed that the Northern government deployed light armor troops and artillery along the disputed oil-producing Abyei region and along the North–South border.
In addition to sustained media attention, what is needed is an enduring international commitment to provide training, election monitors, and other resources needed to aid institution and capacity building. What many fail to realize is that what we are witnessing are only the opening scenes of new dramas that will take years to play out. It is imperative for the success of these efforts that the international community focus on aiding the newborn state to achieve the promise of freedom and avoid the perils of transition.

This is made more difficult in the current conditions of financial constraints on American and European budgets. However, the impoverished Southern Sudanese people have had a difficult history indeed, and they stand at a critical fork in the road. With assistance and properly managed natural resources, the South is a region that could use its oil reserves, arable land, and minerals to develop the new country’s economy and eventually become a viable state. If peaceful conditions are maintained, the South has the potential for future oil exploration, as well as the possibility of new refinery construction.

We should recognize the historic significance of this moment in time, as the birth of a new nation is relatively rare in the post-Cold War era. Over the last 15 years, only a handful of aspiring nationalist movements have actually achieved statehood. This is usually achieved at very high cost in cases such as East Timor (Indonesia), Kosovo (Serbia), and Eretria (Ethiopia). One can only hope that the international attention and pressure that was placed on the Bashir government in Khartoum to hold the referendum will be sustained in order to aid Southern Sudan to achieve the fruits of their victory. The alteration of diplomatic incentive structures will help both sides make their commitments credible.

The upcoming declaration of independence on July 9, 2011 is a pivotal moment that holds the opportunity to create a new path that will break from the cycle of the violent past and lead to a more secure, prosperous and peaceful future for both North and South Sudan. However, it will take a coordinated and sustained international effort. Hopes remain high that independence will bring about the fulfillment of pledges that the Southern Sudanese President Salva Kiir Mayardit made in a speech announcing the referendum results. In celebrating the realization of the South’s long-standing goal he stated that “our purpose is to give to our children what the war took away from us: peace, rule of law, food, security, healthcare, good education, running clean water, electric power and opportunity to pursue happiness and prosperity. We must all work to give our children this hope and future.”

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