

SUDAN: REFERENDUM IN THE SOUTH

END OF OMAR BESHIR OR END OF SUDAN?

KASSAHUN

The registration of Southern Sudanese voters has begun in earnest both inside and outside Sudan in preparation for the January 9 referendum on the secession or independence of South Sudan in accord with the 2005 Comprehensive Peace agreement (CPA) signed in Kenya between the government of the Sudan led by General Omar Beshir and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) led by the late Dr. John Garang. Less than two months before the historic date, that the referendum will even take place, especially in the oil rich and disputed region of Abyei, is not certain and it is also very probable that the referendum result may not even be respected at least by the Khartoum government and a new cycle of war , with drastic implications for the region as a whole, could break out to wreak havoc in Africa's largest country.

Background:

Britain, the colonial power that ruled the Sudan for long, made it sure that Northern and Southern Sudan remain divided. Britain restricted access between the North and the South and denied the Southerners any representation or development. The years from 1953 to 1955 represented the period of non representation of South Sudan in the administrative, civil service or political fields thereby aggravating the disparity between North and South. From 1955 up to the outbreak of the October Revolution in 1964, centralized rule was in place and the 1958 coup maker General Ibrahim Abboud was a outright dictator whose stifling and repressive policies

further damaged the South which was being forced to accept Islam and Arabization. The government of Sir Al-khatim Al-khalifa, which came to power after the October Revolution that overthrew the Abboud regime, was the first government to issue a statement that contained recognition of the problem in the South as political. The October government went on to hold the Round Table Conference for the resolution of the Southern problem in Khartoum in March 1965 during which the Southern Front tabled the issue of self determination.. However, the traditional Northern parties are accused of rejecting Southern demands and aborting the Round Table effort.

Despite the promise of a social revolution and justice for all Sudanese the period from 1965 to 1969 did not augur well for the South. The Juba and Wau massacres in July 1965 are good examples. Veteran Northern politicians who today claim to have some sympathies for the Southern cause were then calling for the Islamization of the South. Hassan al Turabi who was then head of the Islamic Charter Front declared that the South had no culture and needs to accept Islam and Arab culture. Umma party leader, Sediq Al Mahdi, stated the following in October 1966 as the premier of the Constituent Assembly:

“The dominant nature of our nation is Islamic one and its overpowering expression is Arab and the Nation will not have its entity identified and its prestige and pride preserved except under an Islamic revival”.

The position of the then strong Sudanese Communist Party has often been ambivalent on the Southern issue though its central committee held Southern leaders like Joseph Garang (killed by Jafar Nimeri in 1971). Officers sympathetic to the SCP were involved in the May 1969 coup d' etat that took over power but the Declaration of June 9, 1969 was ambiguous at best. The Southern demand had in the meantime evolved from asking some posts in the civil service up to self determination and self administration and the paternalist and even racist attitude of the Northern parties was at odds with the reality. It was back in February 1962 that some Southerners formed the Sudan Africa Closed Districts National Union. In

April 1963, the group changed its name to the Sudan African National Union (SANU) and advocated outright independence for southern Sudan. Junior civil servants or former members of the Equatoria Corps, took arms and formed guerrilla bands, who were all called the Anya Nya, that began activities in 1963. With the help of Ethiopia under Haile Sellasie (that was opposing Sudan's support to Eritrean Liberation Front /ELF/ rebels) and Israel that had a clear interest in weakening the Sudan, and by implication Egypt, the Anya Nya developed into a serious military force that controlled most of the rural areas of Southern Sudan. Its military leaders subsequently formed a political organization called the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM).

In 1971 Nimeri, weakened by a coup attempt by pro SCP officers and confronted by a drain on the weak economy by the war in the South,, agreed to negotiate a compromise with the SSLM. Long discussions culminated in peace negotiations in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in February and March 1972. Under the provisions of the Addis Ababa accords, the central government and the SSLM agreed to a cease fire , and Khartoum recognized the regional autonomy of the three southern provinces. After signing the accord, Nimeri issued a decree for the establishment of a Southern Regional Assembly. The assembly's members were elected in multiparty elections, the first of which was held in 1973, with a second election five years later. Throughout the 1970s, the authoritarian Nimeri government fairly observed the Addis Ababa accords. However, in 1981 Nimeiri practically abrogated the Addis Ababa accords by dissolving the Southern Regional Assembly. The political malaise was further compounded by the economic problems of the South ranging from inflation to lack of basic necessities and jobs. And when Nimeri appointed Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan Turabi as attorney general in November 1981, southern fears of forced Islamaization increased. A mutiny among about 1,000 southern troops in February 1983 led to attacks on government property and forces throughout the region. US educated Colonel Dr. John Garang who at first tried to be a go between the mutineers and the government changed sides and joined the rebellion to form the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement. Nimeri compounded

the whole problem by imposing the Sharia on the whole country. The SPLM formed its army (the SPLA), mainly and massively aided by Ethiopia under Mengistu further inflaming attitudes among non-Muslims in the south, the SPLM and the defeat imposed on Nimeri's soldiers led to the dissatisfaction in the North and the eventual overthrow of Nimeri in 1985.

The SPLM political program was one of forming a New Sudan (not secession as in the past). Yet, the new government of Umma leader Sadiq al Mahdi procrastinated on the main dividing issue of the Sharia though it met with SPLM leaders in Ethiopia's Koka Dam palace. The government was not ready to repeal the Sharia. The leader of the other traditional Northern party (the Democratic Unionist Party/DUP/), of the Kathmiya religious sect, that is to say Mohamed al Mirghani, was ready, on the contrary to repeal the Sharia to achieve peace and consequently met with Garang in Ethiopia (December 1988) to reach a promising tentative accord. This move got the support of other parties and civic bodies in the North. Turabi's National Islamic Front opposed it and put pressure on Sadiq al Mahdi not to accept it. Characteristically, Sadiq al Mahdi temporized and despite public protest and including memorandum from the military never got to repeal the Sharia though it formed a government without NIF participation. Thereby digging its own grave as the NIF plotted a coup against it, In June 1989, the coup of Omar Bashir was made and the whole question of repealing the Sharia and making peace with the SPLM/A discarded.

The rest, as is said, is history and several negotiations and meetings bore no fruit and hundreds of thousands had to die before the agreement in Nairobi could be signed and the way to a referendum on secession/independence be agreed upon for January 2011.

What was at stake from the start?

The vile treatment that the people of Southern Sudan received from the Northern dominated governments is enough by itself to justify a rebellion calling for justice

and respect. But what has been at stake in South Sudan has always been far above and beyond the justified aspiration of the Southern Sudanese. A number of regional and international forces have meddled in the internal affairs of the Sudan and successfully aggravated the wars that have cost the lives of at least two million Sudanese over the years.

It is almost a cliché to say “it is the oil, stupid! Or, “it is the Nile water, stupid! The Sudanese problem, whether it is the South or Darfur, is of oil, water and much more. There is geo politics involved with the size, weight and place of the Sudan on the strategic Red Sea. For the Southern Sudanese it can be reduced to the bare minimum of not being considered as “abid” (slave), shammasa (sun burnt black), inferior or “haywanin” (animals). The Jenubi (Southerners) were never really welcome in the North and were often rounded up and expelled back to the South. A worthy protest and cause by itself, forget the oil and water and geopolitics. The denial of democracy, identity, and self governance or administration has been at the base of the problem that has also been aggravated by foreign interference. Today, the problem is more complicated. The South has oil, as has reportedly Darfur, and this is coveted by the hungry West and China as for the latter Sudan is its fifth largest supplier of crude oil. 45% of the national budget of the Sudan is covered by the oil revenue and the SPLA bureaucracy and army is paid out of the \$ 2 billion that the South gets from the oil sale. The oil of the south is transported to Port Sudan in the North for export and any emerging war could disrupt this and confront an independent South Sudan with no money to pay its army—an alarming scenario indeed. So, what is at stake is more than Southerner’s dignity, self respect and self governance even though southern autonomy after the Addis Ababa accord of the early nineties did prove that the Southerners, left even relatively alone, are not a cohesive at all and were at loggerheads between themselves. The question of the Nile and the Jonglei Canal project (interrupted by the war) is also another factor to be taken into consideration especially now that Egypt (and also the Sudan allied to it) is at loggerheads with the Basin countries on the question of the usage of the Nile River. The Jonglei Canal region is home to two million Dinkas, Nuers and

Shilluks. The political effect of secession on other parts of the Sudan and the region as a whole is also compounding the problem.

- The question of “oil rich” Abyei

Abyei could very well be an excuse for a new North-South war. It is reportedly oil rich and both the North and South are claiming it. But the tag “oil rich” is being put to question nowadays. Writing in the Contributor Rebecca Hamilton has the following to say on the subject (November 2/2010)

“In 2004, when the final stages of the negotiations for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement were underway, the Abyei area was indeed “oil rich.” There were two major oilfields to the east of Abyei town, Heglig and Bamboo, and another to the north called Diffra.

Back then, the combined production of the three fields was an estimated 76,600 barrels per day (bpd). If you crunch the numbers, this amounted to 25 percent of Sudan’s annual oil production. With so much at stake, “oil-rich” summed up perfectly the reasons why Abyei was an obstacle to the conclusion of the peace agreement.

But we are now in 2010. In the intervening six years, two factors have diminished the accuracy of the “oil-rich” label:

First, oil production from Heglig, Bamboo, and Diffra has declined across the board. From the 76,600 bpd of 2004, the 2009 estimates for the three fields dropped to 28,300 bpd. Meanwhile, production from outside the area increased. By early 2009, “oil-rich” Abyei only accounted for 5 percent of Sudan’s annual production.

Second, a July 2009 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, placed Heglig and Bamboo outside of Abyei. Of course these two fields are still physically in the broader border region, and the dispute between north and south over who will benefit from them continues. But they are no longer up for grabs in the Abyei referendum, which is what most reporting on Abyei is about. The only oilfield now remaining in the Abyei equation is Diffra, estimated to have produced just 4,000 bpd in 2009 – less than 1 percent of Sudan’s current annual production.”

There is also the fact that oil production from fields in North Sudan will reach 110,000 barrels per day (bpd) by the end of 2010. Most of Sudan’s oil (500,000 barrels per day of crude) comes from the South and there are talks that South Sudan, after the referendum, will set up its own three oil refineries and build a

pipeline from Juba to Lamu (Kenya) to export its oil through Kenyan ports.. Wily China is one of the bidders to build such a pipeline.

Still, it is safe to say that Abyei continues to be a thorn in the referendum process. It is not likely that the referendum in Abyei will take place on January 9. The proposed sharing of the oil revenues between an independent South, the North and the Massiriya Arabs does not also seem feasible. Oil or not Abyei promises to be a problem point for the Sudan. And January 9 will not solve but compound it further.

What is at stake for the regional and international players is also of importance.

ETHIOPIA: shares a long border with the Sudan (1600 kms in length) and has been historically and strategically linked with it. Historically, they have fought bitter wars of conquest and defense and the Blue Nile, the lifeline of both Sudan and Egypt, originates in Ethiopia. Sudan has banked its future more with the Arab League than with the OAU and over the years had served as Egypt's main conduit of destabilization efforts directed against Ethiopia. Egypt had for years backed Somali irredentism, the Eritrean Liberation Front and other secessionist groups fighting the central government (the TPLF in power now in Addis Abeba was one of the recipients of Egypt's military and financial aid through the Sudan). As a result, Ethiopian regimes have had well articulated strategies as concerns South Sudan and its struggle against the Arab North.

The Haile Sellasie government fully backed, with Israel, the Anya Nya rebellion of the "Christian South" against the Moslem/Arab North. It was a counter for the Sudanese support to the Eritrean rebels. By 1971, Sudan and Ethiopia agreed on the settlement of the Southern problem through dialog and the peace accord was signed in Addis Abeba between the Ana Nya and the Nimeri government. Nimeri went through the motion of closing the ELF offices in Khartoum and Kassala but the move was not serious. When Haile Sellasie was overthrown in 1974, cold war alliances changed with Nimeri becoming close to Washington and the Addis Abeba military regime allying with the Soviet Camp. The Western plan to sabotage the Mengistu regime in Addis Ababa made Sudan its pivotal base and thus anti-Mengistu movements of all categories (secessionists, leftists, Ethiopian contras backed by the USA) were all using the Sudan as their political and military base. To

counter this, the military regime in Addis Abeba committed itself to fully support the SPLM/SPLA to the extent that Ethiopian military C130 planes and soldiers were fighting on the side of the Southern rebels. Mengistu lobbied Mugabe, Castro and the Vietnamese to help Garang and his cause. During the 184 famine in Ethiopia vice president Bush (sr) flew over to the Sudan, met with Nimeri and finalized the Western plan to destabilize Mengistu by using the famine aid to strengthen the Tigrean and Eritrean rebels. More than 95% of the famine aid money was diverted by the Tigreran front of Meles Zenawi (TPLF) with the full knowledge and collaboration of most of the relief and aid agencies.

By 1991, the Mengistu regime fell and the pro Sudan TPLF that took power chased off the SPLM/A from Ethiopian soil. Omar Beshir and his aides like Fath el Erwa who had closely worked with Washington and the Tigrean rebels were elated and in recognition they also rounded up dozens of Ethiopian opposition (EPRP) members and handed them over to the TPLF. The OLF was denied access to Ethiopia through the Sudan. The SPLM main base shifted to Kenya and Uganda. However, the honeymoon did not last and Omar Beshir, whose regime fell out with Washington, and consequently with Asmara and Addis Abeba. While Meles Zenawi, fearing Sudan would open its borders to Ethiopian opposition forces, mended fence with Khartoum but Eritrea continued to back the SPLM and the Northern political opposition and helped launch also the Eastern armed front of the Bejas against Khartoum. The American sponsored drive to destabilize and overthrow the Beshir regime made Asmara its center. Beshir and Meles continued as Siamese twins, the one needing the other's support or neutrality at best and Meles ceded Ethiopian territory (in the historic Quara region) to Khartoum to further placate Beshir. The Khartoum regime has continued to close itself to Ethiopian opposition and to even harass the thousands of refugees on its soil.

What happens in South Sudan is of great strategic importance to Ethiopia even if the regime in Addis Ababa does not represent Ethiopian national interest. In a related strategic consideration, the military regime of colonel Mengistu had concluded that the breakup of Somalia was of paramount importance to Ethiopia

and then went on to arm all and sundry Somali groups to attack the Barre regime and to subsequently create havoc in that country. The plan has worked as the present day stateless and war torn and divided Somalia attests. Is the same calculation of benefit vis a vis the Sudan? Meles Zenawi is walking on both lanes—on the one hand working with Beshir and on the other working with West to assure the secession of South Sudan to whose government (GOSS) it is, along with Kenya, already serving as an arms conduit.

Eritrea: has an importance in the regional politics dictated more by its strategic location along the Red Sea than its wealth. Despite talks of gold discovery, Eritrea is one the poorest countries in the world with an economy that has been further bankrupted by a costly and absurd war with Ethiopia in 1998. Yet, Eritrea has been a regional player. In the early nineties, Asmara worked hand in glove with Washington to destabilize the Sudan and not only opened up the country to CIA officers, the SPLM, northern parties like the Umma and the Democratic Unionist Party of Mirghani but also went further to back the armed rebels in Eastern Sudan (the Beja Congress etc). Eritrea also channeled arms to the Darfur rebels and it was in general conflict with the Sudan. This situation has changed gradually with the Eritrean rulers distancing themselves from Washington and accusing the latter of fomenting plots and conspiracies to overthrow Isaias Afewerki . Eritrean anger was exacerbated by the fact that Washington has refused to put pressure on the Meles Zenawi regime to respect the ruling of the International Court in Hague which had decided in Eritrea's favor on the border conflict. Eritrea's involvement on the side of the Somali radicals (more with Sheikh Aweys than with Al Shabab) also complicated the problem. The strategic concern of Eritrea being its troubled relations with Ethiopia (both help each other's opposition and have tried to wage war by proxy) its stance towards the Sudan ha shifted in accord with this basic concern. Presently, Eritrea is much closer to Beshir than it is with GOSS. Yet, Eritrea is visibly present in Southern Sudan and at the end of the day would prefer a united Sudan to an independent South Sudan under the domination of the West

that has continuously condemned the Eritrean regime for gross violation of human rights.

Egypt: historically, as a neighboring Arab country and strategically because of the Nile Egypt wants the Sudan to stay united with the North maintaining its domination. This same sentiment is shared by Libya and most of the Middle Eastern countries. Sudan is Egypt's ally in its dispute with the Nile Basin countries.

The Western Bloc: with Washington and Britain in the forefront want the Beshir regime weakened and removed. They consider the Sudan as one of the bases for terrorism (though this same Sudan handed over Carlos to the Sudan, had proposed to arrest Osama bin Laden and send him to Saudi Arabia and its intelligence agencies, especially under Nafi Ali Nafi, worked closely with the CIA). A big united and radical (Islamic dominated) Sudan is considered a threat to western interests and thus the secession of South Sudan is encouraged, funded and supported by overt and covert means. The break up of the Sudan, now conveniently being presented as a creation of British colonialism in the first place, is expected and desired by the Western bloc. The campaign over Darfur, with inflated figures and misrepresentation of the conflict as being one between Arabs and Africans, indicates the concerted drive to demonize and isolate the Beshir regime. Not that the Beshir regime has not committed atrocities but one cannot lose sight of the infamous double standard at work here with Hollywood pitching in (George Clooney, Mia Farrow). More than four million Congolese killed and no Darfur type concern has been heard from the West. Genocide by Meles Zenawi in Gambella (against Anuaks) was ignored; Idris Deby and Nguema ate untouchables because they have handed over their oil to Western companies. Furthermore, western policy towards the Sudan and the region has consistently failed to get the overall picture and the implications that affect and would impact on most of the countries in the region. The ICC drive against Beshir is as much a miscalculation as the joint military drive against the LRA sponsored and backed by the USA. The American policy and action as concerns the Sudan have been helped by the IGAD, by the UN representative for the Sudan (who is a longtime pro American, Eritrean born Haile

Merkerios). This policy has not, however, been consistent with several factions advocating either aggressive hard line policy (Sudan Rice and company and others within the CIA and the administration preaching the carrot and stick approach. It should be noted that the new US embassy in Khartoum would be the biggest in Africa and would be the centre for the whole Horn region. What is happening in South Sudan has and will have its impact on Darfur and the Darfur reality is expected to lead to the “Darfurization of Chad” for example. And will the secession bug spread all over Africa? In other words, by the reckless support to the breakup of the Sudan, the West may be unleashing a dangerous and divisive virus all over the region and Africa. Can we or should we justify denying the Southerners their declared inalienable right to decide on their destiny?

China: has china turned imperialist is a question begging for an answer. Be that as it may, China is involved big time in the Sudan (and in neighboring countries like Ethiopia) trying to quench its thirst for oil. Peking has backed Beshir all the way, armed his forces, given him diplomatic support and even at one time involved directly and militarily in South Sudan. As the situation stands, China would prefer for the status quo to continue but cunningly it has also started courting the GOSS and bid for building the pipeline from Juba to Lamu to bypass the pipelines in the North. However, an independent South Sudan may be more inclined to ally with the West than with China and so the secession of South Sudan is not seen positively by China.

SUDAN: The implication of secession for the Sudan is not to be taken lightly. One can say Sudan is the biggest loser of this exercise engineered by the Western countries with cooperation of most of the IGAD members, particularly Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia who follow, to a varying degree, the diktat of Washington. Sudan would be convulsed by the separation of the South and all talk of amicable divorce may emerge as a pipe dream in a short while. Sudan may survive minus the Southern oil but indications are that the loss of the South could possibly engender the same moves in Darfur and even the East and may splinter the Sudan to several parts. That the whole process would be accepted by the North is still a debatable

issue and even if Beshir has doggedly proved to be politically confused and even indecisive there is no guarantee that the army and the Northern political circles would tolerate any break up. The separation move could thus herald the end of the Beshir regime (an event that would have its proper and various pros and cons). The specters of secession haunts the Sudan, and unlike the secession of Eritrea (which was itself backed and encouraged by the Tigrean front in power in Ethiopia), GOSS and Khartoum are not friendly towards each other. The registration itself is causing wrangling and the meeting in Addis Abeba to resolve the Abyei controversy has failed to produce a feasible option. The so called International Court has also muddied the situation by issuing an arrest warrant fro Omar Beshir (crimes against humanity, genocide). Will the referendum of January 9 take place? Will the referendum in Abyei take place and in what conditions? Will the Beshir government accept the outcome of the referendum? Vital questions still awaiting a definite answer.

A news report on November 25 had this to say:

“Sudan Armed Forces helicopter gunship attacked Sudan people’s Liberation Army (SPLA) positions at Kiirabem, in North Bahr al-Ghazal, wounding four SPLA soldiers and two civilians.

“The intention of the SAF in this move is to try to disrupt the referendum process,” spokesman for the ex-rebel SPLA, Philip Aguer was quoted as saying.”

Beshir is opposed to the deployment of more UN troops between the South and the North and he is surely not amused but his exclusion from the African Union and European summit. It is not a secret that armed Southern militias fighting against the Dinka nominated and corrupt GOSS are covertly backed by Khartoum. In the past few years no less than 25,000 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced by fighting between the Southerners. The SPLA is divided and such former SPLA leaders as General George Athror Deng Dut of Jonglei state, Major General Gabriel Tanginye and two other armed groups including Colonel Gatluak Gai who rebelled in Unity state have still not been brought into the fold and integrated with the SPLA. More splinters within the SPLA/M can be expected even

after the referendum. The power holders in Khartoum have not forgotten that in 1991 the SPLA imitated a rebellion in Darfur that was violently crushed. Like Darfur and the Bejas, the Nubas of Southern Kordofan and the Fungi or Ingassana of Southern Blue Nile are also restless. An independent Southern Sudan can fan the flame of separation and the further break up of the Sudan. And this would have far too many undesired effects for the region as a whole. Separation and peace do not seem to cohabit together.

What is to be expected by January 9?

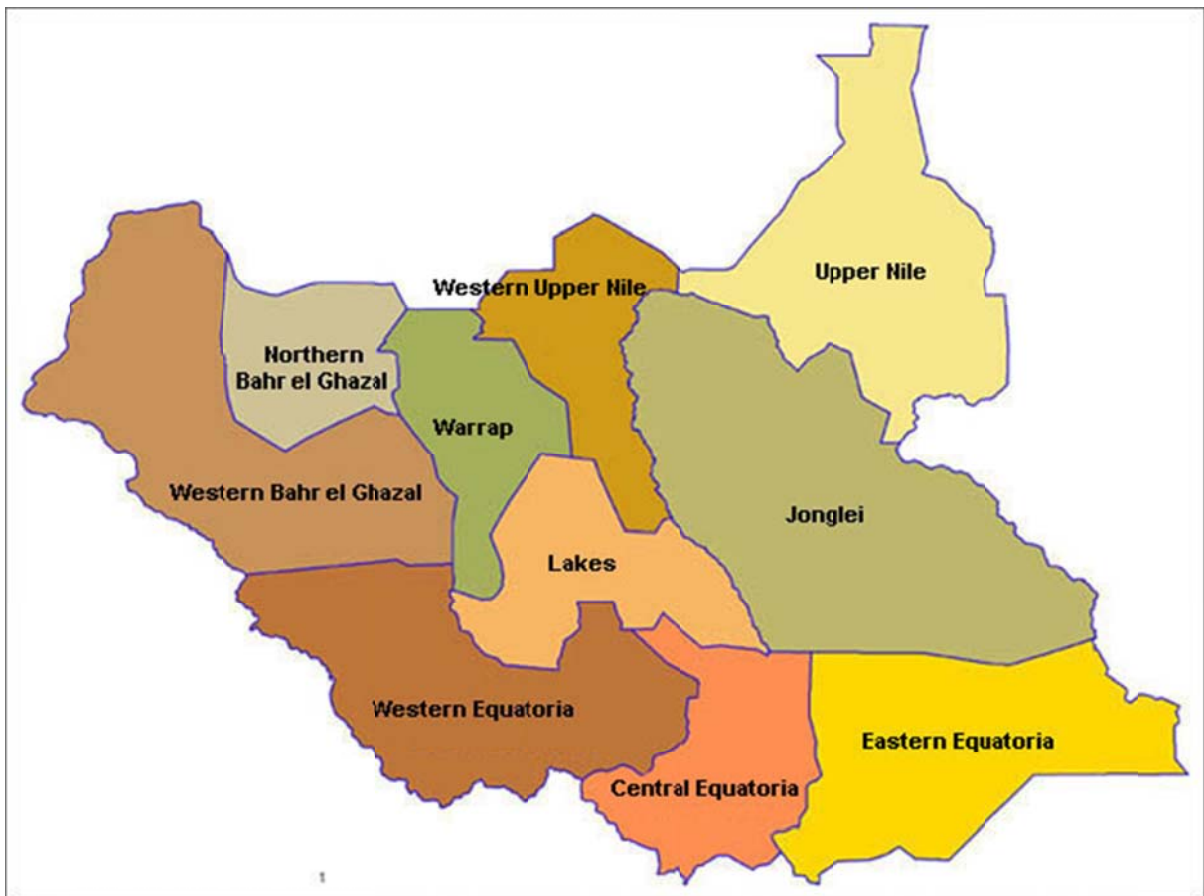
If the referendum does take place peacefully, it is doubtful a free referendum can be a reality in a situation of dictatorship. There is no doubt whatsoever that the majority of the Southerners will vote of separation. The advocate of a united New Sudan, the late Dr. colonel John Garang, was himself inclining towards secession before he died. His death under what many call suspicious circumstances (helicopter accident) has opened up the way for the hard line champions of secession like Sylva Kir and Riek Machar both with very long and close connections with Washington and London.

The secession could lead to war by itself especially if the Abyei question remains unsolved. On the other hand, the referendum may not even be held at the determined time and this could lead to the renewal of conflicts. Last year, close to 25,000 Southerners died in inter-south fighting and Khartoum has been accused of arming Southern groups opposed to the GOSS. Which means that the South may be headed towards inter tribal chaos as the Dinka dominated GOSS has been accused of corruption, “tribalism” and dictatorship.

However, pessimistic scenarios aside, if the North could accept the result of the referendum, if the Abyei thorn can be removed and an agreement that guarantees peace between North and South could be reached it would indeed be a miracle as a conflagration could be avoided even though the problems of the South and the North respectively may still await a democratic resolution. Unfortunately, miracles

rarely happen in the hapless and region and the safe bet is that Sudan (or even an independent South Sudan) will not have peace in the near future. The end of the Beshir dictatorship is nothing to regret but an event to herald with joy while the end of the Sudan and the proliferation of (relatively) mini states left to the mercy of the powers that do not have the interest of the people (and Africa) at heart is not really something to yearn for. An independent South as the end of Beshir could thus be welcome but as the end of Sudan itself is not desirable. Washington hopes to see an independent South Sudan joining Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya and Djibouti to form a pro West regional coalition and to marginalize the “Arab” Sudan accused of Islamic intransigence and support to the “terrorists”

SOUTH SUDAN



Population: 8-11 MILLION (estimates questioned in absence of credible census)

**Area: 589,745 km²
227,702 sq mi**

Capital: Juba (in central Equatoria)

Government

President

Salva Kiir Mayardit

Vice-President

Riek Machar

**Paulino Matip
Nhial**

**Deputy Commander-in-Chief of
SPLA**

Ethnic groups: more than 64 of which Dinka, Shilukm Acholi, Nuer, Anuyak, Toposa and Mundu are some

Languages: many local including Arabic and English

Religion: Animist, Christian and Moslem

Main political group: South Sudan Liberation Movement (SPLM)