

South Sudan: Post-independence opportunities and challenges

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The independence of South Sudan, and the birth of the fifty-fourth state on the African continent, is a pivotal and historic event for the state of Sudan, and for the continent as a whole. The significance of the event goes beyond a mere change in the geographical boundaries of the divided country and the end of an era in its political history; its consequences will necessarily result in long-term change in the geopolitical realities of the region, and will lead to the emergence of new strategic equations.

Conflict between two elites

The independence of the southern state – whose 640 000 square kilometres comprise a quarter of Sudan's territory, and whose eight million inhabitants constitute one-fifth of the pre-partitioned country's population – is effectively the end of a historical era that spanned two centuries in the modern history of Sudan, an era which began with the unified state project launched by Turko-Egyptian conquest in 1821 at the hands of Mohammed Ali Pasha.

After the country's independence in 1956, the Sudanese northern elite inherited the entire geographical entity vacated by Anglo-Egyptian rule. Over the next half century, subsequent governments representing the entire political spectrum of that elite failed to build a collective national project that could transform the geographical entity – which had been created to further colonial interests – into a country with national unity and national homogeneity.

The division of Sudan through the birth of the independent state of South Sudan spells the end of 'old Sudan' – an expression that is juxtaposed to the notion of a 'new Sudan' expounded by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) – with all its political, economic and social connotations, and the national project has now become part of history.

Without doubt, this event is a victory for the SPLM, formerly led by the late John Garang, and which inherited the struggle of the southern elite. It is also a victory for the SPLM's quest – since the middle of the last century – to find a place for itself in the Sudanese national unified state project that would be on an equal footing with the northern elite. The political short-sightedness and absence of a strategic national vision led the northern elite down a path characterised by a lack of awareness of the diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and social components of the country that should have been an integral component in developing a national project. The northern elite was satisfied with limiting the southern elites to the sidelines of the political playing field, leading the latter to demand a national project of its own, the logical extension of which would ultimately be the partition of the country.

While it is true that through secession the SPLM succeeded in overcoming 'old Sudan' and the national project that it entailed, it did not, however, succeed in realising Garang's dream and goal of establishing a 'new Sudan' that would maintain the unity of the country on the new foundations the movement was calling for, and which it saw as necessary for the attainment of equality, justice and equal opportunities for all citizens in a manner that would accommodate the diversity of Sudanese society.

The division of Sudan and the end of the unified national state project is, by definition, a failure of the northern elite. For more than half a century, it failed to answer the important question of how to preserve national unity and the territorial integrity of Sudan. The Islamic Movement of Sudan, led by Hassan Turabi, bears the greatest share of and the historical responsibility for this failure. In 1989 this party executed a military coup against a democratic system, allegedly to save the country and to preserve the unity of the homeland's territory and its people. At the time, its stated purpose was to confront the SPLM's project, which had witnessed considerable growth and expansion in the national arena in the 1980s.

The Islamic Movement mandated itself to shoulder this responsibility, blaming the growing popularity of the SPLM on the weakness and helplessness of the governing political parties. The fact that Sudan has now been partitioned, the unified state project has ended, and the SPLM has succeeded in its efforts represent a massive failure of the coup that intended to 'rescue' the country from precisely these outcomes. It also means that the Islamic Movement's political project has lost its main battle and has failed in the task it had assigned itself in the face of the SPLM-led southern national project. This is especially the case because the secession of the south is not the end of the story; the preservation of the unity of northern Sudan is also doubtful given the emergence of crises that could lead to further division in what have come to be known as 'new south issues' in the states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, as well as in the unclear fate of Darfur and the political and economic instability that characterise the country.

Challenge of African colonial borders

The independence of South Sudan and the emergence of the new state pose an exceptional challenge to the African continent. This comes twenty years after the continent experienced the first case of a country's partition when Ethiopia split into two countries. Such partitioning of states is a departure from the consensus of the founding fathers of the Organisation of African Unity on the need to preserve colonial borders – which were drawn by external powers without consideration of objective factors – for fear of instability, and to avoid civil wars on the continent. It had been commonplace that African borders had been drawn where European colonial interests and soldiers converged.

Eritrea's 1991 secession from Ethiopia, and its formal independence two years later, came after three decades of struggle for its independence. It had previously been under an international mandate after the Second World War defeat of Italy, its occupier. While the Eritrean case did not raise a great deal of concern for African leaders because of their awareness of the political background, the independence of South Sudan, despite widespread African sympathy with southern demands, has raised numerous concerns in African political circles. These stem from a fear of the consequences and implications of secession that is related to racial and religious differences, and the inability of the state to absorb these into a national project to preserve the unity of the political entity. The Sudanese precedent threatens to activate ticking bombs throughout a continent which has no shortage of racial and religious conflicts. Since the 1960s, African leaders had been concerned that Sudan would set a dangerous precedent, and they worked to prevent the situation escalating into partition, warning against tampering with the colonial political borders for any reason lest the continent would witness the collapse of states and societies.

South Sudan's strengths

After the emotional celebrations, filled with the elation and joy of independence and the fulfilment of a long-awaited dream, come to a close, the hour of truth will dawn on the Sudanese people. The question that has kept southern leaders awake and that has concerned their international allies will have to be answered: can the southern elite build a viable and stable new state and a cohesive nation that shares the desire and foundations for co-existence? Or will the wishes of the new state's detractors, who are convinced of its inability to meet the requirements of building and maintaining the unity and stability of its existence and its people, be fulfilled?

South Sudan has the same strengths that were available to dozens of African states upon independence – though they varied in their abilities and successes. At a practical level, South Sudan has the human and natural resources and the political and economic foundations with which to build a new state. As the experiences of other states show, however, whether it will

be able to take advantage of these factors and deal with the challenges of establishing and building a new state will depend on the visions, capabilities and methods of the southern elite that is in power, and its ability to establish and manage the new state.

There is a critical question that will determine the future of South Sudan. Will the ruling elite follow the model of leaders who had the foresight, strategic vision, proper planning and effective execution necessary to build their homelands, and who had, most importantly, placed the concerns and aspirations of their citizens and their national agendas above their personal agendas; or will it drown like other ruling elites that abolished the dreams of their people, limiting the national agenda to what best served their narrow personal interests, plunging into the trap of corruption to monopolize power at any cost?

South Sudan has many internal and external sources of political and economic power. The most important of these is probably the tremendous moral force of a people aspiring to build its newly-independent state after years of yearning, and fighting for liberation and emancipation. Such a force of a people who have attained a long-awaited dream of a homeland in which they can feel like first class citizens that fear no racial or religious discrimination is an important factor that can provide the human energy to build the desired state, fulfil the aspirations of its citizens, and thwart the negative hopes of the detractors.

One of South Sudan's internal factors of power is its geopolitical location. The new state borders six countries: northern Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. This allows it to benefit from the efforts of these countries to maintain their present interests, to achieve new interests, and to compete for the creation of special relationships with it. South Sudan can thus potentially be an influential player in the game of regional balance, opening the door for it to achieve political and economic gains.

The importance of the country's strategic geographical location is of greater significance for powers seeking a foothold in this part of the African continent. This is especially the case with Israel, which is attuned to the importance of South Sudan in the regional balance. Israel has played an active behind-the-scenes role in the issue of South Sudan, providing effective support for southern rebel movements since the late 1960s. In his memoirs, Joseph Lago, a leader of the southern rebel movement Anya-Nya, revealed details about this relationship. Now that South Sudan is independent, both parties are free to transform the once-secret relationship into one with open horizons, allowing the new state to benefit from its geographical location to influence political equations and the balance of power in the region.

Perhaps it is precisely this fact that has been a source of concern for Egypt, from whose strategic perspective the south's secession was a red line not to be crossed, and which has long worked against the partition of Sudan. Egypt is now forced to deal with the partition as a reality, and has to win over the south and show willingness to support the new state, another gain for the south in which it can achieve important interests through its geographic location.

External factor: The US godfather of partition

The most important external factor that serves the interests of the new state is undoubtedly the blessing of the United States. Direct and persistent U.S. support for the southern cause over the past two decades has been a crucial source of strength and support for the southern movements. It is noteworthy that although the issue of the south had a prominent place in Sudanese politics for the past half century, the U.S. did not have a presence in South Sudan until twenty years ago. The first decade of the U.S. presence manifested as humanitarian and relief activity. As the second decade progressed, U.S. involvement took an increasingly political form in search of ways to end the war through a political settlement. There is no

doubt that Washington played the leading role as an architect of the peace settlement by urging the parties to negotiate until the conclusion of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. The U.S. continued exerting pressure and following up on the implementation of the agreement until the goal of secession had been reached.

Despite the U.S. administration's denial of its preference for the secession option, there is considerable debate about whether Washington worked to encourage southerners to secede, or if it was forced to deal with their overwhelming desire for independence. The official position of U.S. President Barack Obama in his strategy towards Sudan tended towards a position of neutrality, leaving the choice to the citizens of southern Sudan, emphasising that the priority for the U.S. was the sustainability of peace – whether in the continuation of a united Sudan, or in the birth of two states able to peacefully coexist in the case of secession.

Whatever the case, the U.S. administration, supported by pressure groups favouring partition, saw itself as the godfather of the independent southern state, and bore a special responsibility towards it. The U.S. has committed itself to protect, nurture and provide for the new state's viability, and to act as the guarantor of international political and economic support for the new state. While there are no known U.S. interests that explain Washington's attention and the pivotal role it played regarding the south, we can say that the United States considers its crucial role in ending the longest civil war in Africa, and the implementation of the peace agreement that led to the birth of the new state, as a major success of U.S. foreign policy which can be used to counter criticism of its policies, especially those concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Economy: Capabilities and challenges

On the economic front, the new state has important strengths, the most important of which is its oil resources which account for three-quarters of Sudanese oil fields, and produce half a million barrels per day. It also has substantial natural resources in plant and animal production. Its mining sector, especially with regards to gold and other metals, can be a great attraction for investors seeking opportunities in the virgin land which requires investment in infrastructure, services, and commodities.

Analysts agree that the biggest challenge facing the fledgling state is for it to maintain internal cohesion – despite the fact that societal relations are based on tribal affiliation. Even though independence has been an important morale-booster for the southerners, it also represents a critical challenge. Opposition to the north played an important unifying role for the south's social forces, to the extent that the idea of a homogeneous south became accepted in the public consciousness. The absence of the northern factor creates a new reality for southerners where they have to confront a multi-tribal domestic context, as well as a host of other divisive factors based on the ways in which tribes and ethnic groups perceive each other. This is in addition to the potential for conflict over the acquisition of power, influence and resources for survival.

A recent UN report stated that 2 000 people have been killed in internal tribal wars in South Sudan over the past few months, and that tens of thousands have been displaced. The report described the casualties of the tribal fighting in the south as having exceeded those in Darfur in the same period. Although the SPLM accuses the ruling National Congress of fuelling these conflicts, it is clear that tribal tendencies and the nature of internal social dynamics stretch beyond the history of the current conflict between the north and south.

What makes these tribal tendencies more dangerous is that they are used as a means of resolving competition and struggle for influence within the SPLM. It is certain that, since its founding in 1983, the movement succeeded in presenting itself as the sole legitimate representative of southern demands, with foundations that transcended tribal affiliations. The SPLM was largely successful in maintaining internal cohesion, overcoming several attempts to splinter the organisation. This success was heightened after the death of the charismatic Garang. His heir, Salva Kiir, showed great ingenuity in maintaining the unity of the movement through the transition period that was critical to the peace process, until attainment of independence.

It is certain that after the announcement of the new state, the SPLM faces an unprecedented challenge. Will it be able to maintain internal cohesion and its role in this new context, or will there emerge a process of sorting and restructuring the balance of power within it? It is no secret that there are great differences and conflicts between the different currents of the movement that had maintained their unity so as not to obstruct the struggle for independence. Given that SPLM leaders represent different tribal affiliations, it is likely that the struggle to gain influence in the new state will stir tribal tendencies in ways that increase the complexity of the security situation, which in turn could have grave consequences for the cohesion and stability of the nascent state.

The second challenge facing the south relates to the weakness of the civil infrastructure, and the lack of state institutions with the necessary governance traditions and regulations in place to ensure the soundness of the state-building process. This is partly due to the prolonged civil war and to the lack of stability in southern civilian life, thus preventing an accumulation of such experience. Additionally, there is a charge directed at those southern elites that have had the opportunity to gain experience. The charge is that they have an inadequate understanding of the responsibilities associated with public affairs, and inadequate commitment to meet the requirements of such affairs.

The SPLM bears a large share of the responsibility for not sufficiently being prepared to administer a state after independence. It alone ruled the south over the past six years, during which the government was not deprived of resources because oil revenues were considerable, as was the international aid that poured into the territory. The SPLM has few achievements that can claim to have begun to bridge the gap between underdevelopment and extreme poverty on the one hand, and the requirements for state-building on the other. The movement has come under harsh criticism from its allies because of widespread corruption within its ruling elite. Indeed, some international donors were reluctant to follow through on economic aid they had pledged, fearing the money would end up lining the pockets of those in power rather than finding its way to development projects.

Another challenge facing the south relates to the economic requirements of building a state. It is well-known that oil revenues shared between the government of the south and the central government in Khartoum accounted for about ninety-eight percent of the south's public revenues. Although an agreement has yet to be reached on a new formula for sharing oil revenues, such an agreement cannot be avoided because the oil produced in the south cannot commercially be exploited and exported except via facilities in the north. It is not foreseeable that this revenue, whatever the final form an agreement with the north might take, will be sufficient to finance a new state in the absence of other real sources of income. The almost total dependence of the south on oil revenues places it in a dangerous position in the coming period. A report by Norwegian experts predicted the depletion of southern oil reserves over the next five years unless existing fields are further developed, or there is success in the exploration for new oil.

The creation of economic alternatives that provide revenue to the new state requires several years due to the serious weakness in the country's infrastructure. Infrastructural development is necessary to encourage and attract the foreign investment necessary to exploit the country's natural resource potential. The enormous challenges facing the new state on the economic front will make it highly dependent on external aid to cover its large financial resource deficit.

While aid might ease the enormous economic pressure, it is not a sustainable solution, especially in light of the experience thus far. At an international conference held in Oslo some months after the signing of the peace agreement, the international community – especially the U.S. and its allies that demonstrated great enthusiasm for the Sudanese peace process – pledged several billion dollars to South Sudan to support peace and reconstruction, and to help the south overcome the effects of war. Only a fraction of the promised money reached the new state. The U.S. administration has announced that it will urge the United Nations to develop a plan to support the new state, but it is unclear what future aid flows are in store.

Despite it having played the role of the new state's godfather, the United States itself did not help the south in the way that South Sudanese had anticipated. U.S. aid to the South Sudan government is no more than 300 million dollars a year, and the U.S. has not effectively contributed to the development of the new state's infrastructure.

Inevitable relationship with the north

The nature of the relationship with the north remains the greatest challenge facing South Sudan. This relationship is characterised by confusion and the lack of a shared vision for its future. Secession effectively dissolved the sovereign dimension of the political bonds tying north to south. This is but one face of the multifaceted interconnections between the two states that are similar to those connecting Siamese twins who share the vital organs that keep them alive and that, if separated, could result in the death of one or both of them.

The two countries share a 3 500 kilometre border. The majority of the residents of both states live along the two sides of the border, with the sources of life and livelihood for humans and livestock spilling over the border. Abyei is a living example of this interdependence. The exploitation of oil to provide the financial resources on which both Sudans rely is unworkable without the cooperation of both states (because of the distribution of oil industry facilities between the north and south). This makes complementarities between the two states inevitable. These reasons set the special relationship between north and South Sudan apart from all their relations with neighbouring countries.

Considering the matter objectively, it is clear that the two states are inextricably linked, and thus communication and cooperation between them are unavoidable. This is emphasised by statements by political leaders in the ruling parties of both countries. The facts on the ground, however, indicate that there are critical issues that have yet to be resolved, and will not be resolved just by optimistic statements by politicians. Further, tension and mutual recrimination have been the main features of the relationship of the parties to the peace agreement over the past years, despite the partnership between them.

The lessons from the Ethiopia-Eritrea experience are telling and still fresh. That partition took place with complete agreement between the countries' leaderships. Furthermore, the coalition of political and military leaders in Addis Ababa and Asmara worked together during the struggle against the imperial rule of Haile Selassie, and, later, Communist rule under Mengistu Haile Mariam. The joint success of these groups in ousting these regimes, as well as the fact that the ruling elites of both Ethiopia and Eritrea share the same religious and ethnic

background, did not prevent the two sides from engaging in a bitter war against each other a few years after Eritrea's independence because of the conflicting national interests of the countries. The previous alliance was transformed into a vicious enmity, one that has yet to be resolved, and the threat of war between the two states continues to loom.

This raises many questions about the future of the relationship between north and South Sudan. Despite the apparent conciliation that marked the partition process, and the mutual understanding that the two states will have to cooperate to achieve their common interests, various factors combine to provide fuel and fan the flames of war – whether directly or by proxy – between the two states. These factors include the background of ethnic and religious difference against which the partition took place, the difficulties of disentangling the interlocking interests of the partitioned state, the persistence of complex issues of contention that have yet to be resolved between the two countries, and conflict fuelled by regional powers competing to achieve their interests.

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