

Sudan and South Sudan Still Suffering the Consequences of Divorce

Written by Peter Run

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PETER RUN, APR 2 2012

Last week the national armies of South Sudan and Sudan clashed on the border. It is the closest the former civil war enemies have come to full-blown and undeclared inter-state war since the Sudanese armed forces occupied the disputed border town of Abyei last year.

The violent skirmishes have thrown talks to resolve outstanding post-secession issues off course. They have prompted the cancellation of a presidential summit intended to negotiate disagreements on oil-revenue sharing mechanisms and cast doubt over the talks mediated by Thabo Mbeki on behalf of the African Union in Addis Ababa.

The break up of Sudan into two sovereign republics has been metaphorically characterised as “the great divorce” and less than a year on, it is systematically, though inadvertently, ticking all the boxes of a bitter and nasty dissolution of marriage.

Custody

Like a divorcing couple negotiating the custody of their children, one of the earliest and continuing dilemmas of parting has been the choice of residence and citizenship for that land's inhabitants.

In the case of South Sudan, the doors are open. People from northern Sudan can claim South Sudanese citizenship and receive it. But it is a young country still learning how to look after its citizens. The Islamist government in Khartoum, on the other hand, wants non-Muslim Africans descended from South Sudan out, and quickly, even though most of them were born and raised in the north.

Consequently, there has been an exodus from Khartoum to the South since July last year. When I was in South Sudan in December, I saw a dense and expanding camp of small houses made entirely of corrugated iron sheets glistening in the tropical mirage outside the city of Wau.

The shining city of iron sheet, my companions explained, is called Khartoum Jadeed (Arabic for New Khartoum). The inhabitants of New Khartoum are educated mainly in Arabic and their new country – which has adopted English as the lingua franca – has no use for their qualifications.

Despite their strong urban background, all I could see looking at New Khartoum was a shanty town different, only in size and age, from the notorious Kibera slum in Nairobi. In slums, the first thing that disappears is opportunity. Then there are health risks.

The proximity of Jur River and the texture of the red earth on which the camp stands indicate that the place will become susceptible to water-borne diseases in the long rainy season of South Sudan.

This month, the Khartoum government is assisting those who forewent voluntary relocation to depart by train. They will need many more New Khartoums in different states of South Sudan. Just as divorce takes its toll on innocent

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children, secession victimised the black African citizens of the former Sudan.

Such unforeseen outcomes of secession are part of why it is such a problematic means of resolving protracted separatist or irredentist conflicts in international relations. The burden of history always haunts the people, and it is likely to keep happening.

Francis Deng, an expert on Sudan and internally-displaced people, warned of these issues long before the division of Sudan. Sadly, his predictions are not only proving correct; they are being exceeded by events.

Family Assets

Extending the divorce metaphor further, the prolonged dispute over oil – which seems to be the trigger of the current wave of violence – resembles the division of family assets. Although South Sudan got the oil in the divorce settlement, it is landlocked and the pipeline that transported the oil before separation now belongs to the ex.

Bitter for the loss of the critical oil revenue which sustained its glitzy lifestyle and won her powerful friends, Khartoum decided to unilaterally hike transit fees for the use of the pipeline and, before long, it began disrupting transits.

The government of South Sudan called this theft and decided to shut down oil production altogether. This hurts both economies. South Sudan is very underdeveloped, and it needs oil production to speed the process of stamping out the marks of prolonged war that liberated it.

Shutting oil production down for the South Sudanese was only a matter of pride, demonstrating its need to act independently. It was a popular decision domestically, but it seems to have had a butterfly effect in the relations between the two countries.

The National Congress Party (NCP) strategically bombs oilfields, according to media reports, possibly to bully South Sudan or deprive it of existing mining infrastructure. It is a sabotage tactic both sides have used.

The Sudan People Liberation Army attacked the Jonglei Canal in 1984 and forced its closure as a result. It also destabilised oil extraction at the same oilfields in Unity State in the 1990s. However, the SPLA was not invading a different country. Their actions were justified by the claim that South Sudan's land was being exploited for the betterment of the centre.

As such, the actions of the NCP now look like those of a bitter divorcee awarded the smaller share of family wealth. The argument over the oil and the pipeline sounds like children arguing over the milkshake where the one with the straw (and no milkshake) feels entitled to drink her sister's refreshment just for that reason.

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