

What Will Become of North Sudan?

Written by Rebecca Tinsley

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REBECCA TINSLEY, FEB 2 2011

In his recent 'State of the Union' address, President Obama spoke of his joy as the people of South Sudan exercised their democratic right to form their own country. Many Sudan-watchers had feared the January 2011 secession referendum would be ruined by violence orchestrated by the regime of the Sudanese president, Omar al-Bashir, based in the capital, Khartoum.

In the event, President Bashir came under enormous pressure from both US and UK governments to abide by his grudgingly-given promise to allow Sudan's southern people to vote for independence. Commentators are now focusing on the challenges facing the fledgling South Sudan. However we ignore what remains of the old Sudan at our peril. It has the makings of an extremely unpleasant nation.

In an ideal world the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that enabled the South to secede from the malevolent domination of Khartoum would also have addressed Sudan's other disgruntled regions at the same time. However, the international community was understandably desperate to stop the regime's campaign of ethnic cleansing that had killed two million southerners over several decades. Hence the diplomats from the UK, USA and Norway who negotiated the CPA ignored the ongoing mass murder in Darfur, perpetrated by poor Arab nomad proxies who were being paid and armed by Khartoum, just as they were in the south.

The long running war waged by the mainly Arab regime in Khartoum against the mainly black African Southerners should not have been seen as unique, but rather as part of a pattern. Other areas of Sudan, most famously Darfur, feel equally marginalised by the extreme concentration of wealth and power in Khartoum.

Some commentators maintain the north-south divide was sectarian because the northerners are largely Muslim and the southerners are generally Christian or animist. However the people of eastern Sudan, Kordofan, the Nuba mountains and Darfur are just as unhappy about the extreme ideological version of political Islam that has been imposed on them by Khartoum over the years.

A speech in December 2010 from President Omar Bashir made it clear that things are about to take a turn for the worse. Bashir told supporters, "If South Sudan secedes, we'll change the constitution. There will be no question of cultural or ethnic diversity. Sharia will be the only source of the constitution, and Arabic the only official language."

Bashir also defended the routine use of public flogging of girls who wear clothing unacceptable to the regime. "They should review their interpretation of Islam because Sharia has always stipulated that one must whip, cut or kill."

Yet, according to the opposition leader, Hassan Al-Turabi, most North Sudanese are Arabs by culture, not ethnicity, and it is much less homogeneous than Bashir would wish. Moreover, the Sharia law propagated by Al-Bashir is distorted, Al-Turabi adds. "Whipping women because of the clothes they wear is untenable. The clothes of women and men were things for society to judge, not the state." Ridiculing the implementation of Sharia law in Sudan, Al-Turabi said: "For them, Sharia is all about beating up girls."

In the Khartoum region alone there were 43,000 incidents of public flogging in 2008. Local human rights activists claim the penalty is used to target students demanding civil liberties.

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The regime is already cracking down on opposition parties, media and civil society in what will be North Sudan. Amnesty International recently documented the fate of those daring to speak out; kidnapping, torture, disappearances and closed newspapers and radio stations. Bear in mind that Sudan is already ranked among the nine most repressive nations by Freedom House.

Dr Albaqir Mukhtar, president of TAMAM, a Sudanese civil society coalition, campaigning for democratic transformation, points to the recent arrest of young people involved in movements like Girifna ("We are fed up"). "We will be crushed by the regime if the world continues to turn its back on northern Sudan."

It is not just activists calling for civil liberties and human rights who are in peril in the new North Sudan: it is also the Southerners who sought refuge in the North during the decades of war. As many as two million of them stayed, starting businesses and families in the grim refugee camps on the outskirts of Khartoum. Many of them tell of experiencing daily abuse from Arabs who consider them racially inferior, regularly calling them, 'abid' or slave to their faces.

Now there is concern they will face increased aggression from the authorities as well as Arab citizens, many of whom are outraged that the South voted to become independent. It is a measure of Arab racism toward the mainly black African Southerners that it came as a shock to most Northerners that the South was so desperate to secede.

According to Abdal-Rahman al-Rashid, a commentator with the pan-Arab paper, 'Al Shariq', Arabs in the North of Sudan are ignorant of what has happened in the South. They knew little of the decades of killing, or the vast gap between the Khartoum region, where power and wealth has been centralised, and the impoverished regions.

Al-Rashid explains, "The Northern (Muslim Arab) population is predominantly "dark" by any standards. To deflect from that fact, northerners conjured a system that calibrates colour so it is not uncommon to hear people describing other people as "Blueish [black]", [Greenish [Black], Redish (to refer to someone with fairly fair skin colour), Halabi (derived from Laban (milk) or possibly the Syrian city of Halab) to refer to those who are fair (probably of Egyptian, Syrian or other light skinned stock) and the second worst of all gradations: "slave" which could describe any of the hues of black. A southerner was simply called a "southerner," outside the range of the calibration system. They almost didn't exist."

Southerners who have remained in the North for economic reasons now fear for their individual and collective safety. During the referendum campaign a presidential spokesman warned that Southerners in the North would lose their citizenship, their jobs in the civil service, and would no longer qualify for any government services such as health and education. For instance, the Omdurman Electricity Company has already fired fifty engineers of Southern origin, some of whom have worked there for fifteen years. Many Southerners are Christians, yet they will be subject to Sharia law.

A small proportion of Southerners resident in the North (only 62,000) participated in the referendum vote because they were aware that even turning up at the polling station might put them in danger. Those who did vote tell of being intimidated, asked how they voted by the police and citizens alike.

Even now, after the referendum, thousands of Southern families remain at squalid gathering points around Khartoum, waiting for transport south, desperate to leave. There have been several reports of bus loads of Southerners being stopped, attacked, raped and robbed as they make their way to South Sudan. The regime is also counting Southern children in orphanages, ready to put them on buses, "so they can be repatriated to their families" (sic).

Unfortunately it seems likely the international community will disengage once the provisions of the CPA have been fulfilled in July, and South Sudan takes its seat in the United Nations Assembly. This will be bad news for those who live in the neglected and marginalised regions of North Sudan, the most famous of which is Darfur. The Khartoum regime's campaign of bombing and ethnic cleansing continues throughout Darfur, but it does so in a

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media vacuum. As recently as January 22nd the Sudanese armed forces raided a refugee camp, raping and beating civilians with impunity. On January 23rd there was a large scale battle between government forces and rebels in Tabit in North Darfur State, leaving at least sixteen people dead. The joint African Union/United Nations peacekeeping force remains there but it is under-funded and without the political backing to challenge Khartoum. Peace talks have stalled because the rebels doubt the regime's sincerity. Hence the so-called 'Rwanda in slow motion' grinds on.

At the time of writing, hundreds of students have been protesting on the streets of Khartoum, inspired by their fellow Arabs in Tunisia and Egypt. Their peaceful demonstrations have been met with tear gas and mass arrests, and it seems unlikely that the much feared security services will side with the people. One student, Mohamed Abdelrahman, has been killed, and the universities of Omdurman and Khartoum have been closed indefinitely. Reporters have been arrested and their film equipment confiscated.

In the words of one local human rights activist, the new North Sudan is going to be a very nasty country. This should matter to the West because of the company President Bashir keeps: he gave shelter to Osama bin Laden for five years in the 1990s, and he considers Iran's Ahmadinejad, Hamas and Hizbollah to be his closest ideological and political friends. Astonishingly Bashir has convinced the CIA and MI6 he is on their side on the war on terror, but those with a longer term view of history are concerned by the likelihood of 'blowback' from consorting with an indicted war criminal and avowed Islamist.

Rebecca Tinsley is chair of human rights organisation *Waging Peace* which campaigns against genocide and systematic human rights abuses. Formerly a journalist with the BBC, she has had two novels published. Rebecca is on the Human Rights Watch London committee and is a trustee of the Carter Centre UK and the Bosnian Support Fund