

# The Challenge of Sisyphus and post-referendum Southern Sudan

Written by Alasdair McKay

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, MAR 3 2011

The labour of Sisyphus has become a well-known and prevalently retold Greek mythology. The tale depicts the Greek king Sisyphus, who as a punishment from the gods for his trickery was made to roll a huge boulder up a steep hill, but before he could reach the top of the hill, the rock would always roll back down, forcing him to begin again. As such, interminable activities in life are often described as Sisyphean.

Although it should not necessary be concluded that there is in any way a certain future in place on this issue, it must be said that there is an intense sense of Sisyphean angst concerning the challenges facing Southern Sudan.

A referendum recently transpired to decide if Southern Sudan was to separate from the north and become an independent state. This milestone referendum was a stipulation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which brought to an end an extremely deadly fifty year civil war between rebel groups in the south and the central government in the north. With roughly 2 million killed, and a further 4 million people displaced repeatedly in its duration, this war was extremely brutal, especially for civilians.[1]

The outcome of the aforementioned referendum was a vote overwhelmingly in favor of the secession of Southern Sudan. Yet, despite the smooth and reasonably peaceful nature of the referendum, Southern Sudan still has some very difficult obstacles to overcome in the arduous process of state making.

Major development issues will need to be addressed in the south as the year progresses. Roughly the size of France, Southern Sudan is one of the most underdeveloped regions in the world: it has just a few miles of paved road, an estimated 85 percent of the population is illiterate and voter education is minimal.[2]

Furthermore, around 180,000 southerners have returned from the north in the past three months, adding pressure to communities already struggling to cope. Refugees International reports that an additional 22,000 southerners remain stranded in and around Khartoum still waiting for transportation to the south.[3] This situation is starting to yield early warnings signs of a severe humanitarian crisis.

However, perhaps the most immediate problem concerns the contested border region of Abyei, which was due to hold a separate referendum at the same time as the south, when its inhabitants would also decide whether to become part of the north or south. Unfortunately, progress on that vote remains in deadlock. The settled populations of the area, the more southern-oriented Ngok Dinka, assert that they alone should have that right to vote. But the nomadic Misseriya people, who migrate to Abyei for several months of the year from the north, are equally adamant that they should vote. In the past, there have been major tensions between the two groups and thousands have died on account of feuds over water and land. Observers are concerned that the referendum may result in new waves of violence.

Even if this potentially explosive situation in Abyei can be effectively resolved, Sudan's economy is still in dire straits. Sudan's debt is estimated to be at US\$38 billion, which understandably remains a serious source of anxiety for the country.[4] The north wants to obtain international debt forgiveness in order to acquire fresh loans, but pursuing that

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route would take many years to accomplish. Other challenges include high demands for foreign currency, rising inflation and a recent decrease in the valuation of the Sudanese pound. As a consequence, both the north and the south must fix their currency, and decide whether a viable replacement for the Sudanese pound will be introduced.

There is also still the issue of striking a coherent deal over the oil resources in Sudan, which have been a significant contributing factor to hostilities. A new deal will need to be struck to assess how the South's oil wealth is to be distributed as the current 50:50 sharing of monies between North and South will not be tenable for an independent South Sudan. The economies on both sides depend hugely on oil – with oil revenue forming 98 percent of the southern government budget.[5] Oil reserves lie mainly in the south but all pipelines run north. The scenario, then, essentially reads that the south is holding the oil, the north a pipeline. Pessimists might be tempted to suggest that this in itself could trigger a relapse into more conflict. But most observers have high hopes that oil can actually provide a determinant for peace, the two future states of Northern and Southern Sudan will be forced to cooperate in the post-secession environment if either are to be beneficiaries. Initial signs are certainly positive. The voting period was a peaceful affair and the referendum result was accepted by the National Congress Party, suggesting that the north has finally accepted the possibility of letting the south go.

The most onerous challenge for the south will be to forge a national identity. Although the south has never truly been a homogeneous entity, it has often found a sense of collective unity through its hostile relationship with the north. Indeed, a general trend in state identity formation is that it is constructed through reference to otherness, and the long wars with the north have certainly cemented an obvious adversary in the minds of the south. Yet, without a common enemy, there are fears of internal fractures and implosions emerging in the south. Leaders must work to bring together disparate groups, including opposition forces and those outside the mainstream Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLM/A). Clashes in early February between armed factions in the south's oil rich Upper Nile state left over 50 dead[6], and provided a stark warning of the potential for violence to occur in the state.

The need for a sense of internal pacification also brings war-torn Darfur into focus. The western region remains a major concern for both north and south with conflict continuing there, although not with the same intensity of the 2003-2004 counter-insurgency. The central government in Khartoum has pulled out of peace talks and returned to fighting against the only rebels they signed an agreement with, the Sudan Liberation Army. With this in mind, some fear that the south's preparations to break away will invigorate rebels to increase their demands from Khartoum. The western region has seen its lands drained in far too much blood, and it is important that a chronic relapse onto the brutal days of 2003 does not occur. Serious efforts from internal and external agents will be needed if peace is to be finally achieved in Darfur.

Yet, in spite of the aforementioned challenges facing Southern Sudan, there is the potential for the nation to thrive. With a reasonably fertile land, young population, and plentiful resources Southern Sudan has the raw materials to build a successful nation – but only if it receives the support it requires. The work of many international actors will be crucial in the trying year to follow in Sudan, and it is important that both north and south cooperate with such actors. Ultimately, only time will tell if Southern Sudan can develop from a weak child of a state into a prosperous nation. As such, feelings of Sisyphean angst must be put aside, and deep contemplation will be necessary before the work now begins on creating a state.

***Al McKay*** holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in politics from the universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth, and has worked for an African human rights NGO.

[1] U.S. Committee for Refugees, 2001 Sudan: Nearly 2 million dead as a result of the world's longest running civil war Archived 10 December 2004 on the Internet Archive Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2011. [2] Hamilton, Rebecca Sudan Dispatch: High Stakes 10<sup>th</sup> January 2011 [3] Refugee International 22,000 South Sudanese Stranded in Khartoum 5<sup>th</sup> February 2011 [4] Pitterson, Leslie MediaGlobal: Sudan's debt may cost its peace 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010 [5] Hamilton, Rebecca "Awaiting Independence Vote, Southern Sudan Has High Hopes" Washington Post, 28<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2010, via Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. [6] Reuters 50 Left Dead After Mutiny by Army Unit in South Sudan 6<sup>th</sup>

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