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South Sudan, Six Months On Irit Back

The dissolution of Sudan into two sovereign states marked the first direct rejection of the African Union's sacrosanct principle of maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all member states since Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1993. After almost four decades of civil war (1955-1972; 1983-2005) and an estimated death toll of more than 2 million people, South Sudan's establishment attested to the ability of a long-suffering population to successfully challenge an oppressive and violent regime.

On July 9, 2011, it seemed the whole world was celebrating the creation of Africa's newest nation. At the same time, no one could ignore the critical challenges facing it. Most predictions regarding South Sudan's fate were quite pessimistic and, indeed, six months later many of these forewarnings have materialized. Additional developments over the past months, however, indicate that there is also a place for cautious optimism regarding South Sudan's future.

The challenges facing the new nation are enormous. Externally, South Sudan's major struggle is with its former overlord and now northern neighbor, the Republic of Sudan. In a referendum held six months prior to independence, the southern Sudanese electorate voted almost unanimously (approximately 98 percent of its eight million voters) for separation from the North. The referendum was the culmination of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in 2005 in Naivasha, Kenya, between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the SPLA/M, the movement that led the southern rebellion during the second phase of the civil war. Although the CPA dealt at length with political and wealth-sharing issues between the North and the South, it left some critical matters unresolved, particularly, the delineation of precise borders between the two states and ownership of the oil-rich area of Abyei. In

fact, oil plays a central role in the economies of both countries, and thus promises to be a matter of ongoing contention between them.

Since the early 1990s, oil has been the country's primary commodity and Sudan's main source of income. During the five years of negotiations between the North and the South, it became evident that many of the oil fields were located in the future southern state. To cope with this reality, the CPA created an innovative deal in which the two sides agreed to split the country's oil wealth. However, the implementation of this decision was extremely problematic. First, the SPLM deeply mistrusted the oil-sharing revenues reported by the northern government. This suspicion was not unfounded, as there were significant discrepancies between reports of the GoS and the main oil companies operating in the country.

Second, as South Sudan is a landlocked country, it depends on Sudan's pipeline infrastructure to export its oil to Port Sudan. Recently, Khartoum threatened to impose a unilateral fee of \$36 per barrel on South Sudan's oil, a far higher rate than is common in the oil industry. In response, Juba (South Sudan's capital) announced that it would consider suspending its oil production.

Third, as mentioned above, the CPA had left the future of the oil-rich Abyei region undetermined. The interim Abyei Protocol, signed in 2004, declared the area to be part of the states of South Kordofan and Northern Bahr el Ghazal, simultaneously. However, six months after independence tensions over the contested area have crystallized into fears of direct confrontation, and with good reason. In May 2011, following the referendum but before the official declaration of independence, the Sudanese air force carried out bombing raids on Abyei that were followed by a full-scale ground offensive. The GoS claimed that its actions were a response to attacks by southern forces in Abyei that had killed dozens of northern soldiers. Additional confrontations between Sudanese and South Sudanese forces occurred in the weeks following South Sudan's official proclamation, creating much insecurity in their common and unclear border region. According to reports from the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations, these events also aggravated the situation of about 20,000 refugees encamped in the area. The United Nations announced recently that it intends to deploy 2,800 peacekeeping troops to maintain security.

For both governments, the likely consequences of direct military confrontation would be dismal. For Sudan, the risks include the weakening of its political center and a destabilizing effect on its Western (Darfur) and Eastern (the states of Kassala and the Red Sea Hills) regions. Major clashes would most probably have a deleterious effect on oil production, and the resulting loss of income would likely be devastating for South Sudan.

The case of Eritrea might serve as an important lesson for the new state. With the outbreak of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1988-2000), the hopes that Eritrea would be a model of nation-building under the leadership of a liberation movement that had successfully ushered its people to independence quickly faded. Although both countries suffered from the war in terms of

casualties and attendant costs, the long-term consequences for Eritrea were much more severe than for Ethiopia. Political conditions deteriorated rapidly, which led to the formation of a military dictatorship, the economy experienced an almost complete collapse, and social cohesion dissipated.

A full-blown military confrontation over the oil-rich region is not inevitable. But its very possibility is raising concern in the international community, particularly in China. As the biggest investor in Sudanese oil, most of which is either in the South or the disputed Abyei region, China is strongly encouraging both countries to peacefully resolve their oil and border disputes. Considering China's major role in both countries' economies, it may well be able to play a decisive mediating role.

South Sudan's oil resources may also be influential in its future relations with the East Africa Community (EAC), a free trade zone that includes Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. Recently, rumors surfaced of South Sudan's desire to join the EAC. Although more cautious voices in Juba expressed the fear that South Sudan's infant economy would be overwhelmed by the EAC states, joining the community may provide South Sudan with a chance to build a pipeline that would traverse Uganda to the Kenyan coast, and thus reduce its dependence on the Khartoum government's pipeline. In fact, a major French oil company, Total, announced that it is bidding to build such a pipeline.

No less daunting for the new state of South Sudan are its internal challenges. Indubitably, economic issues are enormous: the country is defined as the world's poorest, almost entirely lacking in infrastructure; more than half of its population is fed by aid agencies, and the country is utterly unable to absorb its numerous refugee communities (at least 800,000 persons from Sudan alone). No less important is whether or not the new state will be able to create a national ethos and identity that can serve to unify its ethnically, linguistically and religiously heterogeneous population. The unwillingness of the ruling SPLM to incorporate new political parties and regional opposition movements is already causing division and strife, and doesn't bode well for the future.

Prior to independence, in March 2011, after losing the election to another SPLM candidate, former SPLM General George Athor Deng led a militia that clashed with SPLM forces. Recently, clashes between Athor's and SPLM forces resumed in the eastern Jonglei State, claiming the lives of many civilians. Athor justified his actions as a response to the undemocratic and corrupt behavior of the SPLM, and accused the ruling party of committing "crimes against humanity," mainly against its opponents. Others accused the SPLM of exercising a preference for the Dinka over other ethno-religious groups when appointing people to influential positions. Whether these accusations are well-founded or not, South Sudan's ruling party has to find ways to democratize and incorporate its various ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional interest groups. Failing to heed these early warning signs may lead to calamitous civil strife. For example, recent reports from Jonglei State indicate the resumption of ethnic conflict, mainly between the Lou Nuer and the Murle tribes. These clashes have claimed the lives of countless numbers of people, and have caused tens of thousands to flee from their homes to the safety of the bush.

Consequently, these events have caused an increase in the already significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in this state.

Interwoven into the issues of democratization and pluralization is the question of forming a national political culture. As of late, South Sudan seems to be moving toward the reclamation of its British heritage, asking to join the Commonwealth of Nations (formerly the British Commonwealth), and deciding to use English as the language of instruction in its schools. In fact, the latter choice represents a change from the past; the language previously used was Arabic. This decision can be seen as an act of liberation from decades of cultural coercion by the North and its imposition of an Islamist and Arab supremacist ideology on the South. Whether or not this renewed interest in South Sudan's Anglophone heritage will be used as a constructive force for building an authentic national culture remains to be seen. Similarly, the answers to many questions regarding the future of the world's newest nation will be revealed only in time.

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