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## South Sudanese independence: no 'final walk to freedom', but the beginning of a long, hard road

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# The Current Column

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# South Sudanese independence: no 'final walk to freedom', but the beginning of a long, hard road

Bonn, 17 January 2011. In their excited anticipation of the imminent birth of Africa's newest country the international community must not underestimate the massive challenges of nation-building in South Sudan.

The referendum on whether the south of Sudan should secede from the rest of the country took place as scheduled from 9 - 15 January 2011. Results are due to be announced in early February, and if a majority votes in favour of independence – as appears likely – the south will secede after a six-month transition period.

Expectations are unrealistically high. Celebrity Western commentators have fostered the impression that the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) – the *de facto* government of southern Sudan – are freedom fighters against the criminal Khartoum government led by President Omar al-Bashir and the National Congress Party (NCP). According to this beguiling, yet mythical, narrative, the SPLM will lead their people into the brave new world of statehood, peace and reconciliation between the African south and Arab north. But what are the prospects for stability and prosperity in an independent South Sudan, and how can the international community best support the new country?

## A difficult birth

Independent southern Sudan will be one of the world's most fragile countries. Key provisions of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement have not been implemented, such as an agreement on sharing oil revenues, the demarcation of the North-South border, and the disarmament of militias in the border regions. The unresolved status of Abeyei province is likely to lead to localised violence, if not a resumption of all-out north-south war. Violent incidents have cast a cloud over the referendum.

Southern Sudan is one of the least developed places in the world – at independence it will be

starting virtually from scratch. Major investments in infrastructure are needed, especially roads and utilities such as water and electricity. There are currently only a few kilometres of paved road in a country the size of France and many dirt roads are impassable in the rainy season. UN figures show that 85% of the adult population is illiterate and only 2% of children complete primary school. Following independence the SPLM will no longer be able to blame the common enemy in Khartoum, and frozen conflicts among southern ethnic groups may flare up as frustration with the newly sovereign Juba government grows.

The SPLM has so far shown neither the capability nor the commitment to deal with the massive challenges it will face. It remains largely a military organisation with questionable democratic credentials. Some civil servants can barely read and write and there are strong suspicions that corruption is rife. The SPLM receives an estimated \$US 2 billion annually in oil revenues, much of which pays the salaries of public sector workers including 140,000 soldiers. Although a large chunk of the rest has been spent on weapons, the SPLM has limited capacity to control its territory. The provision of health services and other public goods is left to international aid agencies and NGOs.

## A nation on life support

Independent Southern Sudan will need international support for many years if it is to avoid the fate of Somalia, Congo or Eritrea. The danger that southern Sudan's implosion would destabilise the region is widely recognised, and so the international community will not immediately abandon its newest member. Governments in the West, China and Africa have urged Khartoum and Juba to pursue peace at all costs and have promised to remain engaged.

The quality of this engagement must be improved. Southern Sudan will need a better coordinated international response that includes all actors, including China and South Africa. Interna-

tional investors and aid workers have been present in Juba since the civil war ended, transforming the town into a sprawling mass in a few short years. Donor coordination, especially among the various trust funds active in southern Sudan, has been poor. The SPLM has tried to improve the situation by developing their own aid strategy but their capacity to push donors to work together is limited.

### **Khartoum cannot be ignored**

Khartoum will be a key player in the South's nation-building process. President al-Bashir allayed fears that the NCP would try to disrupt the referendum, instead travelling to Juba and announcing his intention to respect the result and support the South if it chooses independence. Time will tell whether he will be true to his word. The NCP reportedly maintains ties with the notorious Ugandan rebel group – the Lord's Resistance Army – and can pull strings that would exacerbate ethnic tension in the south.

A peaceful transition in southern Sudan is nevertheless in Khartoum's own best interest. Southern oil will need to be exported through northern refineries and ports, meaning that the two countries will remain economically interdependent for the foreseeable future. Large scale political vio-

lence in the south could spill over into the north, especially as the SPLM can also pull strings in the Darfur, south Kordofan and Upper Nile regions.

The international strategy for supporting southern Sudanese independence must include incentives for Khartoum so that they support (or at least not actively undermine) their new southern neighbour. The United States has offered the carrot of normalised relations and the removal of Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. European moves to ease sanctions, resolve the current impasse over funding development projects in northern Sudan, and address the thorny issue of the International Criminal Court indictment against al-Bashir, all need to be part of this package.

For Germany and the European Union, engaging in deeper political dialogue and engagement with the Khartoum government will require a change in policy. European politicians and officials may have to hold their noses where President al-Bashir is concerned and will have to take care that the NCP does not take advantage of thawed relations, especially with regard to Darfur. Nevertheless, a period of pragmatism is required if nation-building in southern Sudan is to have a chance.



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