

African renaissance: towards a New Sudan

by Francis M Deng

What was the war about? Have its causes been addressed by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)? What are the future prospects for the South after the tragic death of John Garang?

Sudan is a nation whose identity has been divisively distorted but which is now striving to rediscover itself, albeit in a tragically violent way. The silver lining is that a more constructive search for an identity framework around which Sudanese could unite may be within reach.

As with most, if not all, African countries, the colonial power brought together into a state framework national groups that had been distinctive, separate and in some cases mutually hostile. The identities that are currently in conflict are the result of a historical legacy characterised by a form of slavery that classified groups into a superior race of masters and inferior enslaveable peoples. The North, two-thirds of the country's land and population, is inhabited by ethnic groups, the more dominant of which intermarried with incoming Arab male migrants and traders and, over centuries, produced a mixed African-Arab racial group that resembles the African peoples south of the Sahara. Indeed, the Arabic phrase, *Bilad al-Sudan* ('land of the blacks') refers to all of those sub-Saharan territories. Arab immigration and settlement in the South were blocked by distance, environmental barriers, the harsh tropical climate and resistance of the warrior Nilotic tribes. Those Arabs who ventured southwards were primarily slave raiders, driven by commerce, not interest in Arabising and Islamising the South.

As the dominant partner in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, the British ended slavery and effectively governed the country as two separate colonies. They developed the North as an Arab-Muslim society and forged in the South an identity that was indigenously African, exposed to Western influences through Christian missionaries, but otherwise denied any political, economic, social or

cultural development. Until colonial policy dramatically shifted in 1947, it appeared that the British intended to prepare the South for independence as a separate state.

The independence movement was pioneered and championed by the North, supported by Egypt. The cause was reluctantly supported by the South, which stipulated federalism and guarantees for the region as conditions for endorsing independence. The South opted for independence on the basis of Northern reassurances that their concerns would be given 'serious consideration'. However, the North quickly reneged on promises to Southerners and stepped into the British colonial shoes. As internal colonisers, Northern governments sought to impose Arabisation and Islamisation as the bases of a unified homogeneous Sudan.

Southern opposition to impending Arab domination began in August 1955, six months before independence, when a battalion of southern soldiers in the town of Torit mutinied and fled with their weapons. Their protest escalated into a rebellion which resulted in a civil war that was to rage intermittently for over half a century.

The initial conflict, secessionist in its objective, lasted until 1972 and ended in a compromise – the Addis Ababa Agreement – that granted the South regional autonomy and ushered in a precarious decade of peace. Its subsequent unilateral abrogation by the government led by Gaafar Nimeiri – the military strongman who ironically had made it possible in the first place – led to the resumption of hostilities in 1983. Southerners were incensed by Nimeiri's embracing of Islamism, his redrawing of North-South borders to incorporate southern oilfields and plans to construct

the mammoth Jonglei Canal to divert the waters of the Sudd (the White Nile's vast floodplain) and channel its waters northwards for irrigation.

Garang's vision

In 1983 Dr John Garang de Mabior founded the Southern-based Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army. The SPLM/A's stated objective was not secession but the creation of a restructured New Sudan, in which there would be no discrimination on the bases of race, ethnicity, culture, religion or gender.

Garang's vision of the New Sudan was initially not understood, far less supported, in the North and the South and even within his movement. For southerners, who overwhelmingly preferred separation, it was incongruent with their aspirations, and in any case was utopian, since the North could never allow it. For the North, it was arrogant and, at best, naïve. The fighting men and women in the South took it as a clever ploy to allay the fears of those opposed to separation within Sudan, the international community and the Organisation of African Unity (later the African Union). Their attitude was reflected in the Dinka saying popular among fighters: "*Ke tharku, angicku*," "What we are fighting for, we know." While Garang was talking the language of a united Sudan, they were fighting for secession.

Central to Garang's philosophy was the conviction that the dichotomy between the Arab-Islamic North and the African South is largely fictional. While the North has been labelled Arab, even those who can trace their genealogy to Arab origins are a hybrid of Arab and African races and even their culture is an Afro-Arab mix. Significant portions of the country in the Nuba and Ingassana or Funj areas bordering the South are as African as any further south in the continent. The Beja in the Eastern part of the country are also indigenously Sudanese. The Fur and several other ethnic groups in Darfur to the far west are black African. And, in

most cases, these non-Arab pockets of the North, though predominantly adherents of Africanised Islam, have been almost as marginalised as the people of the South. The vision of the New Sudan therefore promised to liberate all these people and to create a country of genuine pluralism and equality, with a greater influence for the previously marginalised African groups.

Over time Garang's constructive approach neutralised those opposed to secession in the North, Africa and the world, and rallied support for justice in a reconstructed Sudan. Garang incrementally challenged the whole country with the prospects of a nation enriched, rather than ravished, by its racial, ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. His dream began to appeal to those non-Arab groups that had been subsumed under the Arab-Islamic umbrella and, eventually, even to northern liberals as many began to question their assumed 'Arab' identity. This national identity 'renaissance' began to challenge the dominant Arab-Islamic establishment. The reaction of the establishment throughout the 1990s was to adopt a radical offensive posture that fuelled Islamic fundamentalism and led to a sharp deterioration in Sudan's relations

with the international community. Islam, rather than Arab race or culture, was their only weapon for mobilising the Northern majority.

CPA and Addis Ababa

The Addis Ababa Agreement gave southerners a corner of the country within which to exercise a limited degree of autonomy while major national and international issues were left to be determined by the centre. The agreement did not provide the South with a financial base and southern ministers remained dependent on the goodwill of central government and President Nimeiri for revenues.

However, the agreement was significant in that it gave interim recognition to Sudan's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity while opening channels of interaction and mutual influence that would, over time, allow for the evolution of an integrative national unity. That identity would no longer emphasise the divisive elements but would instead highlight that which, though unrecognised, is in common, as the basis for mutual self-identification as Sudanese. In many ways, the Addis Ababa Agreement was a major achievement but also a phase of a

work in progress. Its main shortcoming was the asymmetrical relationship between the North and the South which would have facilitated gradual assimilation of the South by the North rather than equitable integration that would make diversity a source of enrichment.

On 9 January 2005, the Government of the Sudan (GoS) and the SPLM/A signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA has brought peace between the North and the South and the neighbouring regions of the Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile. The CPA gives the South the right to secede through a referendum to be exercised after a six-year interim period and stipulates that unity be made an attractive option during the interim period. It also offers the Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile significant regional autonomy. To a significant extent, the CPA ensures a more symmetrical or equitable relation between the North and the South than was available under the Addis Ababa Agreement.

The South now has its own government. The Government of South Sudan (GoSS) is fully independent of northern interference, has its own army, its own resource base, access to oil

SPLM/A Leader John Garang and Sudanese Vice-President Ali Osman Taha during peace talks in Kenya.





revenues and control of its own branch of the National Bank, which, unlike its northern counterpart, will adhere to conventional – rather than Islamic – banking principles. Sudan is to have a national foreign policy which will allow the South to develop bilateral relations with international trade and development partners. In the Government of National Unity announced in September 2005, the SPLM and other southern representatives have ministerial power within an arrangement set out in the CPA which gives the ruling National Congress Party 52% of the places, the SPLM 28%, other northern parties 14% and other southern parties 6%. In order to maintain agreed quotas and reflect Sudan's ethnic and political balance, several ministries will be represented by a minister and a state minister.

This complex framework has been threatened by Garang's sudden death in a helicopter crash on 30 July 2005. He had led the SPLM/A for 22 years and, together with First Vice-President, Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, had been pivotal in the negotiations that led to the CPA. He had been sworn in as First Vice-President and President of Southern Sudan only three weeks previously. His death sent shock waves throughout the Sudan and devastated the millions of southerners who saw him as a redeemer.

The SPLM/A acted promptly by electing Garang's deputy, Salva Kiir Mayardit, to succeed him as Chairman of the SPLM, Commander-in-Chief of the SPLA and President of Southern Sudan. In the spirit of the CPA, President Omar Hassan

Al-Bashir endorsed Salva Kiir as the First Vice-President of the Republic. While leaders in the North and South committed themselves to pursuing Garang's vision of a New Sudan, many fear that Garang's death has left a vacuum. Sudan has been deprived of a man poised to address the country's myriad crises, to bring to the East and Darfur the skills to facilitate peace and reconciliation he had displayed in his native South.

Given the fact that this is a peace accord between opposite poles of an acutely divided country, it remains to be seen whether this much-needed peace will be sustainable. Several other regions of the country – foremost among them Darfur in the West and the Beja region in the East – are still up in arms against the Arab centre. Though Muslim and Arabised in varying degrees, they now see themselves as non-Arab, marginalised and discriminated against on racial grounds. While marginalised groups in Kordofan, including those who have been generally labelled as 'Arab' though reflecting strong African features and cultural characteristics, still identify with the Arab centre, dissident voices are complaining about their marginalisation. Even the Nubians of the North, in recent generations close to Egypt and the Arab world, are reviving their pride in their ancient Nubian civilisation and disavowing the Arab label.

Sudan poised at critical juncture

The forces favouring unity within the Sudan, and in the region and the

international community, hope that unity will be made attractive to the South during the interim period. As the non-Arab peripheries challenge the status quo, the country is called upon to transform itself and start constructing an inclusive framework of national identity in which all Sudanese would find a sense of belonging as equal citizens. The choice for the Arab centre is to play a positive role in the equitable reconstruction of the country. Given the genocidal nature of identity conflicts, the international community will continue to be needed not only to fill the vacuum of national responsibility and to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to the civilian population but also to promote the cause of a just and comprehensive peace, the only credible and viable means of preventing genocide.

The millions of people who acclaimed Garang on his triumphant return to Khartoum to be sworn in as First Vice-President were not only southerners but people from around the country. Garang's vision had captured the imagination of the nation and had become a spectacular success. Even opponents grudgingly went along with the waves of change.

Garang raised the South and the Sudan as a whole to heights previously never conceived. Will those to whom he has passed the baton – northerners and southerners – allow the nation to fall from those heights? Or will they come together and join with those who opposed Garang to pursue this vision that will give all stakeholders their rights, whether their preference be partition or the unity of the nation? In six years time southerners have the right to decide to secede or remain in a united Sudan. The North and Sudan's international friends have been presented with an historic opportunity to make unity attractive to the South.

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