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## **Sudan's 55<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: No Reason to Celebrate**

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On 1 January 2011, the Republic of Sudan commemorated 55 years of independence. For the Sudanese nationalist movement, which emerged in the 1920s, stagnated for over a decade, and revived after World War II, the establishment of an independent state was an unvarnished triumph. Sudanese statehood not only marked the end of almost six decades of British colonial rule; it also put an end to the persistent internal debate between those aspiring to full independence and those favoring unity with Egypt. Thus, the end of British-Egyptian rule—or, more accurately, *de facto* British control—over the Sudan, heralded the euphoric beginnings of what, it was hoped, would quickly develop into a stable and prosperous state.

Now, 55 years after independence, the gap between hope and reality in Sudan seems unbridgeable. Sudan clearly belongs in the category of failed Middle Eastern and African states. Dr. 'Abd al-Mun'im Sa'id, chairman of the board of the Egyptian *al-Ahram*, expressed the severity of Sudan's circumstances when he wrote in mid-December 2010 that "the situation in Sudan is more dangerous than that in Iraq." The governments in Khartoum and neighboring states, particularly Egypt, are extremely apprehensive as January 9, 2011 draws near. It is on that date that a referendum will be held, if all goes as scheduled, in the south of the country in accordance with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA; the Naivasha Agreement) signed between the south and north in 2005, following decades of brutal conflict. The vote is expected to result in the region's

secession, and the establishment of a separate, independent state. The repercussions are likely to reverberate throughout Sudan and its Middle Eastern and African environs.

A widespread concern is that Sudan and its surrounding African region are sitting on a powder keg and that the outbreak of new cycles of violence might erupt not only along the south-north conflict line, but also in the south itself, as well as in the peripheral non-Arab areas of northern Sudan. One likely flashpoint is the disputed oil-rich enclave of Abyei. It should be noted that simultaneously with the referendum in the south, a vote is supposed to take place in Abyei on whether the local population, which has historical and ethnic links with the south, would join the new state if established or remain part of Sudan. Other non-Arab, yet Muslim, areas of northern Sudan such as the Nuba Mountains of Kordofan and the southern Blue Nile, are also simmering with distrust and hostility toward the Khartoum Government and could witness major unrest. Conflict might also engulf eastern Sudan, which is economically deprived and politically dissatisfied. Sudan's proven reserves of 6.7 billion barrels of oil could fuel the flames of war for a long time.

The possibility of a new oil-rich state, which would be in urgent need of military, technological and economic support, might serve as a powerful magnet for attracting a wide array of regional and international powers. Most noteworthy among them are China and Russia—both already have invested interests in Sudan and in its geo-strategic environment.

Another reason for anxiety is that the Darfur armed conflict, which first erupted in west Sudan in 2003 and which is still simmering, might be adversely affected by the southern secession. Darfurian rebels might well seek to follow the same path, thus further destabilizing the country. The war in Darfur has been nourished by historic sediments of tension between the Arab-Muslim government in Khartoum and its affiliated Arab-Muslim society in Darfur against the African-Muslim Darfurians, whose ethnic rear base lies across the border with Chad. The non-Arab Darfurians have been determined to put an end to their chronic political marginalization and insecurity, racial discrimination, and economic deprivation.

Sudan's dire situation is rooted partly in the enormous heterogeneity of Sudanese society, the result of an artificial merger of a variety of ethnic, religious and other social groups. The two major population blocs are the Arab Muslim north and the mainly African Christian and animist south, neither of which is homogeneous in itself. The central government in Khartoum has been under Arab Muslim control since independence. The south constitutes about one-third of the state's territory (2,506,000 sq km) and population (estimated at 44 million), which has suffered from chronic discrimination and neglect at the hands of the Khartoum authorities. Violence erupted on the eve of independence and culminated in a destructive civil war between the central government and the southern region. This war—which is distinct from the civil war plaguing Darfur in west Sudan, though the two conflicts affect one another—has swept the Sudanese state and society into a maelstrom of bloodshed. A peace agreement was achieved in 1972 but collapsed eleven years later. Overall, the war was a chronic and uncompromising struggle of the Sudanese state and its people over their religious and ethnic identities and over their share of the national economic and political pie.

The African Christian and animist population has persistently demanded that the government in Khartoum recognize and honor the south's unique ethnic and religious character, share with it the state's economic resources and permit it to attain its legitimate share of power in the central government, but to no avail. Successive Sudanese governments have continually sought to impose their hegemony, including an Arab Muslim identity, on the heterogeneous Sudanese state.

The Sudanese government was particularly insensitive and patronizing towards the non-Muslim population when in 1983 it introduced a comprehensive enforcement of Shari'a law (Islamic holy law) across the religiously diverse society. Since his ascent to the presidency in 1989, 'Umar Hasan Ahmad al-Bashir has further strengthened Sudan's religious character: it is now a strictly Islamic state.

Khartoum's discriminatory policies have not always been driven by malicious intent; they also reflect Khartoum's inability to placate the various segments of a large and diverse society; as well as the government's preference for channeling scarce resources (including oil) to its power bases in the north.

The upcoming referendum vote is the topic of the day in Sudan and the international community. It has been branded a “time bomb” in the Saudi-owned *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper and described as an “explosive engine” by top Sudanese officials. Many other Arab and Western media sources predicted that the referendum would be the “new spark” to rekindle the south-north war.

What will happen the day after the referendum? Will a new round of bloodshed ensue? Will the Islamist regime in Khartoum be able to live peacefully with this new non-Muslim oil-rich state beside it? Will a new eruption of armed violence be limited to the south-north axis or will it engulf other areas across Sudan? Will a new state, if established, be successful, or be torn apart by political and ethnic rivalries and thus become another failed state? Apparently, the answers will not be long in coming.

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