

Sudan, Southern Sudan and Darfur on the road to 2011: FAQs

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1. What is happening in Sudan in 2011?

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 called for a referendum in Southern Sudan in 2011 to determine whether the region would become an independent country. The CPA was signed between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Government of Sudan, at the time led by a military regime headed by Omar al-Bashir.

2. What were the issues in the war that led to the CPA?

The war between north and south Sudan involved a myriad of issues, but the central ones were a strong sense by the SPLA that successive northern-based military and civilian regimes that controlled the government of Sudan had repeatedly adopted policies that were unfavorable to residents of the southern regions. People in the south of Sudan had distinctive languages, cultures and religious beliefs, and felt that northern Sudan was imposing Arabic language and culture, and Islam. A colonial legacy of marked differences in economic development between north and south meant that southern economic development continued to be far below that of the north. Oil fields, located largely in southern Sudan, were perceived as largely likely to benefit northern Sudan without radical political change. Southerners, as 30% of the population, felt that they were condemned to be a perpetual minority in the country.

3. If the referendum were held in free and fair conditions, what would be the likely outcome?

It is nearly certain that southern Sudanese will vote to become independent.

4. Will the powerful regime in northern Sudan prefer to return to war rather than "give up" the south?

A crucial determinant of whether Sudan reverts to war will be the process and outcome of the April 2010 legislative and Presidential elections. If the elections are perceived to be free and fair, and the ruling military regime (which has been transformed into a civilian National Congress Party) retains power, then the regime is likely to feel secure in its northern base and will be willing to give up the south. There are many scenarios where the northern regime will prefer to re-ignite the war and prevent the referendum. There are also scenarios whether both sides prefer to have the referendum, but where spoilers provoke violence that leads to an escalation in violence ultimately leading to renewal of war.

5. What can the international community do to ensure a free and fair referendum?

First it is important to recognize that the powerful countries of the world that constitute the "international community" have varied and complex interests in the possible outcomes in Sudan, and that within each country there are interests preferring and competing for different outcomes. It seems reasonable to think that the international community will only be able to influence outcomes towards peace if the public and private diplomacy of all the major powers are aligned in a united and strongly voiced direction. For example, all the powers might agree to commit themselves to automatically enforcing "cooling off" periods for both north and south following a violent incidence; i.e., there can be no retaliatory escalation for a certain period of time. The powers might agree on verification technology and processes to then determine sanctions against parties that move first to use violence.

6. Is South Sudan a viable country?

South Sudan will be in exactly the same geographic place after it becomes an independent country. The policies that will determine whether the economy thrives are the trade and migration policies of its neighbors, most importantly northern Sudan. If northern Sudan decided to block southern Sudan, it is unlikely that the economy of the south would thrive. But of course the 50 year civil war was partly fought over the issue of economic equity between north and south, so this would not be anything new.

7. What about Darfur?

Peace talks between fragmented rebel groups in Darfur and the NCP have bogged down, and the 2.5 million displaced persons in Darfur seem to have adapted their livelihoods to new forms of living. The impetus to war seems to have dissipated. Omar al-Bashir remains indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Very little can be predicted about how dynamics from the Darfur situation will be shaped by and in turn affect events in Sudan.