

Sudanese independence

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On 9 January polling started in Southern Sudan in a referendum to determine whether one of the largest states in Africa will divide. The result of the referendum is so certain that the South's Independence Day has already been set for 9 July, six months after the start of polling. Many see this as the culmination of the peace process and the agreement signed in 2005 that ended almost 22 years of civil war which had resulted in around two million deaths.

When secession happens, it will result in two new countries. South Sudan will become the 196th country in the world and one of the poorest despite its potential resources. The North, meanwhile, will be greatly diminished by the loss of those resources, particularly 80% of Sudan's oil reserves and revenue.

Separation presents a risk of violence. Sudan's current President, Omar al-Bashir, is the only Head of State wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and whilst he has recently played down threats of violence, there remain disputes in the Darfur Region and other areas. A parallel referendum on joining the north or south, due to be held in the oil rich region of Abyei, has been abandoned as a result of lack of agreement over voter eligibility. These disputes are likely to rumble on.

Even if independence happens without further incident, it faces not only border disputes with the North, but also factionalism across the South. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between the North and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The SPLM/A, whilst being the largest political faction, is not the only one. The North-South divide, between an Islamic North and an animist and Christian South, masks significant differences between groups within the South that were untied against Khartoum but lack a united post-independence ideology.

Sudan's secession makes a number of African governments nervous. The last country to gain independence was Eritrea in 1993 and this resulted in a series of violent disputes with Ethiopia. Somaliland has been campaigning for independence from the world's perpetual failed state, Somalia, and may now look to South Sudan, as will Darfur, the Delta in Nigeria, Cabinda in Angola, Ogaden in Ethiopia and the northern Sahara in Nigeria. These regions may look for political independence along with the resources they control despite the received wisdom that integration brings greater economic, security and political rewards than atomisation. The drive to new statehood therefore makes domestic rulers and international agencies nervous for the future of the continent as a whole.

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