

Towards a united North Sudan under Darfur presidency

By Abdullahi Osman El-Tom

January 11, 2011 — The separation of southern Sudan has undoubtedly been traumatic for the absolute majority of people on the northern border of the divide. Amongst others, the departure of the south has dealt a serious blow to the concept of New Sudan, ironically associated with John Garang, the southern saviour of the Nation who did not survive to keep the country together. To his credit, Garang's struggle for freedom, equality and unity was not all in vain. The spirit of New Sudan that he inspired still lives with us and will undoubtedly remain the only vision that can deliver us out of our current impasse.

The departure of south Sudan has now enmeshed the rest of the country in a formidable dilemma, which, if not handled carefully will unravel the entire nation, Balkanising it into several entities. Analysts are already contemplating a repeat of the separation of south Sudan in Darfur, the Greater West, South Kordofan, the Blue Nile and the Red Sea regions. The gravity of the situation puts the onus on all of us to take account and devise strategies in order to keep the rest of the country together. In so doing, we must have the courage to face the following facts: That the departure of the south has robbed Al-Bashir of his only remaining CPA anchored legitimacy; that his last election was flawed, and was hailed as such, by national and international observers; that all major political parties, as well as rebel movements, have declared Al-Bashir and his party as unfit to rule Sudan, and; that a consensus exists to replace Al-Bashir, in one way or another, by a broad democratic coalition of other political forces.

The ruling River Nile elite must accept the uncomfortable fact that the implementation of the CPA has been responsible for the outcome of the referendum. Namely, it has failed to convince the southerners of the willingness of the northern elite to endorse the New Sudan, an entity that is capable of the accommodation of all, irrespective of religious, cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences. But the accommodation of all does not simply entail the sharing of low to medium power as the northern River Nile elite seemingly understand. The River Nile northern elite appear willing to accommodate the marginalised parts of the Sudan, as long as they retain clear presidency of the country. Unfortunately, the international community, western or otherwise, Islamic and non-Islamic alike have gone along with this seemingly 'generous' sacrifice of the ruling elite in the Sudan. Worse than that, the oppressed Sudanese too have gone along with endorsing their oppression and accepting their relegation to a subordinate position. Thus in Naivasha as well as in Abuja and later in Doha peace venues, representatives of the oppressed groups called for a power share that accorded a place in Khartoum's Presidential Palace that is no higher than a First Vice President for the South and a Vice President for Darfur. In the end, Darfur got the position of a Senior Assistant to the President, a pitiful position deemed fit for the oppressed.

In many parts of the world, leaders stay ahead of their people and bring them along as they lead. But the Sudan is destined by its fate to be different. Its leaders prefer to remain behind, waiting for their people to lead them through uprisings staged by their average citizens; a pathetic situation, akin to that of shepherds led by their flocks. Worse than that and as history shows, gains brought about by popular uprisings are consistently thwarted by the very leaders who are supposed to stage the change in the first place. Aboud of 1958, Nimeiri of 1969 and Al-Bashir of 1989 are perfect examples in this regard. Such a fate must change if we are to move forward.

As far as the concept of New Sudan is concerned, it is the average Sudanese citizen, rather than Sudan's political leaders, who understands its depth. The historic and unparalleled reception of John Garang in Khartoum in 2005 shows that the average Sudanese citizen wanted him as a future president of the whole of Sudan and not simply that of the south as the CPA overseers, Al-Bashir and all other River Nile elite later decreed him to be. Exceptions, however, exist and must be acknowledged. In a meeting in The Netherlands, in 2002, Khalil Ibrahim of JEM told John Garang that the only way to retain the unity of Sudan was to have Garang as President of the whole country. The timing of Khalil's revelation was impeccable and should have sent a clear message that we could indeed put an end to the unfair hegemony of River Nile elite over the nation and move towards a situation whereby the Presidential Palace ceases to be the preserve of one Region to the exclusion of others; a dream that was not to be.

The departure of the south is likely to rekindle this debate. Leaders of Darfur Movements, and particularly JEM, that boast a national profile have so far kept the lid on the issue of self-determination. However, as long as the River Nile leaders want to keep the marginalised people out of the Presidential Palace, this issue will not go away. Offering self-rule, a federal system and representation outside Khartoum Palace is neither enough nor compatible with the true essence of a fully-fledged New Sudan.

But rebel leaders too must rise to the task. They have to assume their responsibility and stop playing victims waiting for handouts in peace venues. They must equally assert themselves with their new allies of the London-Launched Broad National Coalition, all of whom are dominated by River Nile elite. No more acceptance of that Vice President post, self-rule or a federal system that excludes presidency of the nation. The major political parties; the Umma Party of Al-Mahdi, the Democratic Unionists of Hasanain-Marghani, the Popular Congress Party of Turabi and the Sudanese Communist Party of Nugud - and needless to say, all of them are River Nile based - must rise to the challenge and demonstrate their new vision in practical terms. Since they have all confirmed that Al-Bashir must go, they must be prepared to push the intended transformation to its logical limit. They must equally concede that the new president of Sudan must depart from what has dominated the country since its independence and come from the marginalised parts of the Sudan. After all, none of these major political parties have the willingness or ability to lead an armed struggle against the government. Their campaign remains dependent on the good will of the average Sudanese citizen to catapult them into power through a popular uprising.

Few contest the very basic fact that JEM, and much more recently the Alliance of Resistance Forces, manage the only military force against Al-Bashir. The departure of the SPLA of the South destines them to be the heirs and guardians of the marginalised people in the Sudan. Given the contribution of Darfur fighters to these two organisations, the depth of grievances the current war left in the region, coupled by the population weight of the region, Darfur becomes the logical origin of the coming president of Sudan. Hence, demanding an in-coming president from Darfur becomes the only way to rekindle faith in a genuine New Sudan, safeguard unity and prevent the total breakup of the remaining Sudan. Such a demand must be central, and strategic, at every peace venue and every international mediation platform, no more and no less.

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