

Khartoum's minister threatens reprisal following January Referendum

By Abdullahi Osman El-Tom

September 28, 2010 — The result of the impending January 9th self-determination Referendum of southern Sudan and subsequent separation of the South is a foregone conclusion. As I write these notes, the Government of National Unity is conducting a seminal visit to the USA. The two Sudanese Vice Presidents, Kiir and Taha have already conceded secession of the South. Their mission remains to assure the international community of their readiness to overcome some remaining difficulties and ensure peaceful and transparent implementation of the Referendum.

Leaving the carefully managed diplomacy, can the 500,000 to 1.5m southerners who reside in north Sudan deliver their votes without fear of reprisals? Unfortunately not as there is little prospect of a plebiscite being run in a fair and transparent way. As sad as it is, this is the message being sent to southern voters in northern Sudan. And the reminder comes from none other than Khartoum's Minister for Culture.

In a recent debacle, Sudan's Minister for Culture, Kamal Ibaid warned about the fate of the southerners in the north if they vote for independence, a legitimate right guaranteed by international conventions but equally by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and I quote:

"They [the southerners] will not enjoy citizenship rights, jobs or benefits, they will not be allowed to buy or sell in Khartoum market and they will not be treated in hospitals, We will not even give them a needle in the hospital."

What is deplorable is not simply the threat that the statement poses to the carrying out of the referendum in an environment free of fear of reprisals. Rather, the statement is a clear call to the mob in the event of a secession vote to re-enact the ugly violence following the last Kenyan elections of 2007 or the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. What is bizarre and worryingly dangerous is that Khartoum's Minister does not seem to know that secession of the South does not strip the southerners in the north of their "northern" Sudanese citizenship, or likewise with respect to the northerners who may wish to live in the South after its independence. These people remain equal citizens in accordance with constitutions on both sides of the divide. Our Minister does not seem to have learned from the experience of other countries that have undergone separation but continued to have substantial minorities whose origin lay behind the national borders. Examples here include the Eritreans in Ethiopia, Muslims in India and the Palestinians in Israel.

As expected, the callous statement of Minister Ibaid elicited a sharp response in the Sudan but only from government opponents. The SPLM criticised the Minister's remarks and commendably assured commitment to the safety of northerners in the South in the event of a majority vote for independence. JEM Spokesperson Ahmed Husain castigated the Minister for his statement and demanded he be put on trial for incitement to hatred and inviting racism and discrimination.

In the dictum of the northern Sudanese ruling elite - as distinct from northern Sudanese people - Minister Ibaid's statement is neither an idiosyncratic revelation nor a callous slip of the tongue. In fact, Ibaid's proclamation is steeped in the mentality of the Sudanese northern ruling elite and should have come as no surprise to anyone. This is the same mentality which is now breaking up the Sudan and which the late Dr Garang worked tirelessly to change in his efforts to build a New Sudan. Garang often lamented the deeply ingrained division of Sudan between Awlad Al-balad (worthy children of Sudan) and the remaining majority who do not belong. The first favoured group refers to the Arabized groups of the northern region of the Sudan while the latter consists of the Southerners, the westerners, the Nuba and the Beja. These latter groups are often called "Africans", a derogatory term in the lexicon of the Sudanese ruling elite, used as a synonym of the term "abeed" (slaves). While some concerned Sudanese are reeling from Ibaid's statement, his fellow Minister for Foreign Affairs is enmeshed in a dispute for calling the southerners "Niggers". In response to his critiques, he comes up with what an Arabic proverb calls "an excuse worse than the offence". Thus, he justifies himself, as reported: "He [Karti] described as "absurd" and "irresponsible" bringing up the issue of using the derogatory term "nigger" to refer to Southerners saying that people all around the word curse at each other" (ST, September 27th 10).

One may excuse the illiterate Janjaweed for uttering racist slurs but certainly not those who are educated enough to rise to positions of Ministers. The war cry of Darfur Janjaweed when attacking their neighbours says: "whoever dies goes into martyrdom and whoever survives gets the wealth of the slaves". The term "slaves" is used in reference to their neighbours, who are also referred to as zurga (black) or Africans. Never mind that the Janjaweed are just as black as their neighbours, as well as the rest of us!

That racism is so embedded in the culture of the ruling elite of Sudan is also clear from another statement by Abdel Rahim Husain, the current Minister of Defence in 2008. When asked about rumours about possible resettlement of Egyptian farmers in northern Sudan, his response was:

"For the sake of debate, let us assume that the government is intending to resettle 5 million southern Egyptians (Saaida) in the northern Region of Sudan. So what? There are now 8 million people in Darfur, all of them are Africans and coming from abroad. Would it be better for you to have those coming into you from Egypt or those who are coming from West Africa?"

Five years after death of Dr. Garang, his fight against the Awlad Al-balad mentality remains as fierce as before. In this mentality, only those who are admitted into the so-called "Arab" club are entitled to live in Sudan while the rest are disposable souls and have to be content with just that. Hamdi, a Khartoum Ex-Minister for Finance defined this in geographical tenets. In one of his revelations, he advised the current ruling party to restrict future investment to what is now known as Dongola-Obeid-Sennar Triangle. This triangle excludes the Southerners, the Westerners and the Blue Nile people. As for those who have betrayed the triangle and sneaked into Khartoum, they will be disappointed to discover they are still to be excluded. Hassan Mekki, philosopher and bigot of the ruling party of Sudan has already paved the way for such exclusion by stating: "Khartoum is besieged by a black belt [southerners and westerners] who fill the city with flies by day and burglary at night". Minister Ibaid's statement must be read in this context. It is the most explicit call for ethnic cleansing, removing the undeserved citizens and restoring comfort to the worthy children of the land.

If anybody has the illusion that Al-Bashir may act and sack or even reprimand Minister Ibaid in order to appease the southerners and others, he or she should think again. Ibaid's announcement is well in tune with Al-Bashir's thinking about the unworthy children of the land. Not long ago, he was quoted, commenting on rape atrocities in Darfur saying: "He [Bashir] told us, [if] this Gharbawia [Darfuri woman], when a Ja'ali [man from the Ja'al tribe] man humps her, is this an honour or rape?" (Sudan Tribune, March 30, 2010). Minister Ibaid broke no rank in Khartoum's junta. He is well in line with the thinking of Khartoum's ruling elite.

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