

# Sudan: The countdown

By Gérard Prunier and Maggie Fick June 2009

Crucial deadlines are nearing in the interim period of Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement, or CPA, which ended a 22-year civil war between the North and the South. And as the deadlines grow closer the international community is at risk of sleepwalking toward the coming 2010 elections and the following southern referendum without mustering the necessary energy to stop the looming threat of war. The Obama administration is to be congratulated for bringing together key signatories and more than 30 countries and organizations in Washington this week in an effort to reinvigorate CPA implementation, but much more will need to be done. Recent events in southern Sudan highlight the many problems with the current approach to the complex and ambitious project of implementing the agreement. Increasingly hostile relations between the National Congress Party, or NCP, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, or SPLM; a recent spate of intercommunal violence throughout the South; and an array of abandoned or unimplemented CPA provisions threaten to derail the CPA before 2011, when the semi-autonomous South will likely vote for its independence from Sudan, marking the end of what is commonly referred to as the interim period. Perhaps most importantly, parties to the CPA, particularly the NCP, have not faced any cost from the international community for a failure to implement key provisions of the agreement. Until the international community changes this fundamental dynamic, no conferences or consultations will change the basic facts on the ground.

With less than 19 months remaining before the end of the CPA interim period, the international community can no longer afford to half-heartedly address these worrisome dynamics. Renewed Sudanese civil war could bring wholesale violence on a terrible scale while further destabilizing the entire region. A renewed diplomatic push in the waning period of CPA implementation built around the use of principled and direct penalties and incentives could prevent Sudan from relapsing—but this strategy will have to be more sustained, coordinated, and strategic than prior efforts, which have failed to adequately respond to recent challenges and opportunities. If there continues to be no cost for flouting key provisions of the agreement, renewed conflict is likely.

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## The rough road to 2011: Challenges and dangers

When the CPA was signed over four and a half years ago elections were a key element of the internationally supported strategy to set Sudan on a path toward democratic transformation. Elections offered hope of altering the predatory relationship between the repressive government in Khartoum and its marginalized peripheral populations, a dynamic that has plagued Sudan for much of its 52 years of independence and that remains at the root of its interlocking crises. Elections were also seen as a means to make administrative structures in the South more

accountable and effective. Today Sudan's coming elections are not as a whole a cause for hope, but instead a sobering microcosm of the challenges facing Sudan in the run up to the 2011 referendum. The elections still mark the beginning of a process that will durably alter the country's history, but considering the current state of play, this process might lead to the violent dissolution of the Sudanese state.

## Huge hurdles and bad precedents: The elections and the referendum

Enough recently argued that while the prospect of wholesale democratic transformation in Sudan through the 2010 elections is no longer realistic, holding elections on time and in a safe environment remain essential for avoiding the outright collapse of the CPA.<sup>1</sup> However, as delays continue to plague the electoral process and deadlines pass largely without comment or action by the ruling parties, the prospect of holding these elections at all grows more daunting. Moreover, these challenges set a dangerous precedent that directly affects the all-important final benchmark of the interim period of CPA implementation: the referendum for the self-determination of southern Sudan.

Daunting legal and logistical obstacles currently impede the electoral process. The National Elections Act, enacted in July 2008—more than two years after the date agreed to in the CPA—is vague on the policies and procedures for the elections and draft regulations have yet to be finalized. The National Assembly recently adopted highly questionable reforms to the Press and Media Law, and it has yet to amend the National Security Act, a law that bears directly on the safeguarding of civil liberties during the electoral process. Voter registration remains an enormous logistical challenge, as it will now be held during the rainy season, a time when most of the rural and remote areas of Sudan are largely inaccessible by road. With less than nine months remaining before the polling period begins, 20 million potential voters must be registered in a voter registration process that has not yet commenced. These voters, the majority of whom are illiterate and many of whom have never voted before, will then be asked to complete a complex and confusing series of ballots, casting their vote in local, regional, and national elections.

Meanwhile the ongoing dispute between the northern and southern governments over the results of Sudan's census has blocked progress on the elections timetable and deepened the impasse between the North and South on the crucial issue of wealth and power sharing after the referendum.

One international specialist working on Sudan's elections told Enough, "No one is paying attention [to the elections] right now, but in six months, people will be ringing the alarm bells. By then it will be too late."

Potentially perilous elections will directly affect the self-determination referendum for southern Sudan, which politicians in both the North and South rightly view as an event with enormous ramifications. Unlike the elections, which were reluctantly accepted by the Sudanese parties at the behest of the international community (particularly the United States), the 2011 self-determination referendum for southern Sudan is the provision of the CPA that resonates most deeply with the southern Sudanese people. Although popular perceptions around elections are mixed, the National Democratic Institute's focus group research, which has tracked opinions in the South since the CPA was signed in 2005, shows a consistent and overwhelming desire among southern















