

Beware of Sudan's secessionist demons

By Chibli Mallat

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Sudan is about to break up into two states, and regional stability is at risk. The first worrying sign was the whitewash of the presidential election there held last April by no less a seasoned elections monitor than Jimmy Carter. Although the voting was deemed not to have met international standards, the former US president made it clear that the international community would recognize the winner.

Considering the fact that Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir has this week been indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide in Darfur, and that leading Sudanese democrats, especially the opposition politician Sadeq al-Mahdi, refused to participate in the elections, the conclusions of the Carter mission were troubling. How could a genocidal dictator be recognized as winner under such circumstances?

Then I understood: The electoral charade carried out by the Sudanese president to remain in power, which was condoned by international monitors, was a prelude to the momentous events that Sudan will face in six months' time. Carter and the Western states in general have facilitated the dictator's survival in order to salvage the referendum over the independence of Southern Sudan that will be held in January 2011. Having accepted internationally monitored elections, Bashir can no longer prevent the referendum from taking place in the South. The referendum, which will also occur under international monitoring, will result in the formal division of Sudan into two states.

The ensuing tsunami will wreak havoc on the two emerging Sudanese states, and havoc on the rest of Africa and the Middle East. Those who support the secession of the South may not fully realize what this means for the international order. With a dictator like Bashir still in power in Khartoum, and likely a mirror image of authoritarianism coming in the new Southern Sudanese capital, we will witness endless conflict over borders and ethnic cleansing. This will be fuelled by the curse of oil, which represents 98 percent of the revenues of the central Sudanese government, and 60 percent of the revenues of the South.

Secession also means that Darfur will continue under the ferocious rule of Bashir's regime, while the democrats in Khartoum will be left alone to fight one of the worst rulers in Sudan's history.

Southern Sudan will be the first post-independence country in Africa since the 1960s to be established as the result of a secession. African leaders are rightly concerned about the precedent it will create. They do not have enough of a voice, however, and the United States and Europe are fully supportive of Sudan's split, partly on account of the dominant Christian component in the Southern population.

We in the Middle East should be equally concerned. Instead of finding means of legal conviviality with those having different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, groups with a grievance will be tempted to go for Sudanese-style secession in the future. And there are many groups and many grievances against dictatorial rulers in our region.

Furthermore, the destructive logic of the Christian-Muslim divide will only be exacerbated. Europe has already paid a huge price with the secessions in the former Yugoslavia, and Sudan will rekindle hardly appeased volcanoes in East Africa. After Sudan, the Lebanese Christians may be encouraged to seek their own statelet, Cyprus may find unification between its divided Greeks and Turks more difficult to achieve than ever, and Muslim-Christian coexistence within existing nation-states will be under duress the world over.

And yet who can blame the Southern Sudanese for wanting to cut all their ties to a country ruled since Bashir's coup in 1989 by a ruthless dictatorship? However, much as Southern grievances are justifiable, independence is not a solution. A different legal set-up is necessary to accommodate differences between groups living within a single nation-state, namely federalism. Yet federalism is meaningless without democracy. This is true nowadays for Sudan and Iraq, as it was for the United States in the lead-up to its civil war in 1861.

At this advanced stage of Sudan's chronicle of collapse, only US President Barack Obama and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon can do something. I doubt they will. Obama has too many problems to deal with at home and in Afghanistan to give the required attention to Sudan, and Ban Ki-moon is a lackluster UN leader. Indeed the UN system seems incapable of producing secretary generals who are anything other than lowest common denominators.

The only chance left to avoid the full-front effect of a Sudanese crisis is for Omar al-Bashir to be removed from power. But even here the international whitewash of his so-called election complicates matters. Within a year, Sudanese citizens will be left with two bickering countries, and Bashir will continue to be fostering torture and death in Khartoum and Darfur. We will be left with a precedent that legitimizes secession as a privileged recourse against dictatorship, as well as a further retreat of the democratic agenda.

Democracy means sorting out problems together, not going one's own way in a separate state every time there is disagreement. Only a miracle can save Sudan from the demons of secession. The precedent set could be devastating for the Middle East and well beyond.

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