

Pressure from US ensures Sudanese poll goes ahead, despite fraud

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Sudan voted recently in the first multi-party elections since 1986. The result maintains the status quo. The incumbent president, Omer Hassan al-Bashir (NCP), will remain in office with Salva Kiir (SPLM) continuing as first vice president and also president of the government of Southern Sudan. Kiir won 92.99 percent of the southern poll.

Bashir, who came to power in 1989 in a military coup, has been indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court. He won 68 percent of the vote.

The elections, a crucial precursor to the upcoming referendum on southern secession, had been insisted upon and endorsed by Britain and the United States, as brokers to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

As was widely expected, the main beneficiaries of the partially boycotted elections were the two parties to the CPA, the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) in the north and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in the South.

The CPA was signed in 2005 and brought an end to the decades-long civil war. The poll included presidential, legislative and local elections, and also a vote for the leader of the semi-autonomous government in the south of the country.

In an attempt to portray a democratic consensus government, and with one eye on the upcoming referendum, the NCP have announced that they are prepared to work with oppositionists and bring them into the government after the election. The SPLM has issued conflicting statements on its acceptance of the results and its ability to work with Khartoum. However, it will come under pressure from the US to do so.

International election observers have pointed to widespread evidence of electoral irregularities and fraud, though all have been keen to downplay this. The

Carter Centre, headed by former US President Jimmy Carter, and European Union observers have said that the polls had fallen short of international standards, but that they were a significant step towards democracy.

While regretting the “serious irregularities”, the US administration praised the “peaceful and meaningful” elections, expressed its support for the implementation of other milestones under the CPA, and vowed to continue working with both the central and southern governments.

Most serious commentators expected electoral fraud and anticipated the NCP would remain in power, but they also expected Western governments to accept this outcome with only minor criticism since the poll represents an important stage in the CPA process that culminates in next year's referendum to decide whether the South will become independent.

“We look at this election as part of an extremely important strategic process. The Carter Centre is working very closely with the United States government, with [US Sudan envoy] Scott Gration,” said Carter. “There are some groups that want the election to succeed and I represent one of those groups.”

The threat by some opposition parties to boycott the poll had caused panic in Washington. Gration hot-footed it to Sudan in an attempt to persuade the opposition not to boycott and so save the elections, which he declared to be “as free and fair as possible”. This prompted the NCP to declare, “Even America is becoming an NCP member. No one is against our will.”

Opposition parties had issued contradictory statements on the boycott, with some withdrawing and then re-entering, others partially withdrawing, and still others leaving the decision up to individual candidates. Some of the boycotts were announced after the ballot

papers were printed, leading to the candidates receiving votes anyway. A number of smaller opposition parties have expressed their dissatisfaction with the process, and have announced that they will not recognise the results, though this will have little effect.

The NCP presented the boycotts as merely a reflection of the opposition's fear of failure, but while some certainly sought justification for their likely inability to win certain seats there are other factors at play. The SPLM in particular has been shown to be divided on the question of how to proceed, with contradictory messages about whether to boycott reflecting divisions over whether the SPLM should continue working in partnership with the NCP in a national unity government, or actively work towards full independence.

The SPLM is the main party of government in the South and its interests are often equated with the interests of all southerners. However, there is growing disquiet with SPLM rule in the South and increasingly obvious divisions appearing in the SPLM.

The northern sector, a partner of the government in Khartoum, has historically worked towards uniting opposition forces against the government to create a "New Sudan". But as partners in government they have certain common interests with the NCP, which does not want secession. This coincidence of interests has been exacerbated by Washington's growing closeness to Khartoum, particularly on security questions.

However, self-determination would give the southern sector increased power as the region's ruling elite. The late SPLM leader John Garang established the two sectors in 2005 in the process of establishing the CPA, and they have co-existed since then. But as the referendum on southern secession gets closer, the divisions between the two sectors have increased.

The contradiction between promoting both unity and secession is increasingly seen as a flaw within the CPA. *Africa Confidential* cites one Western diplomat who recently claimed that, despite appearances, both Britain and the US were opposed to including the independence referendum in the CPA during the negotiations that they brokered. Washington has historically openly supported the interests of the South against Khartoum.

Bashir has promised to accept the outcome of the referendum due in January even if the South chooses to

secede, but the NCP and perhaps also the Western powers will do everything they can to scupper this outcome. There are still a number of decisions to be made prior to the referendum, any of which could be used to delay the vote. These include the position of the north-south border, the division of oil reserves and revenues, the allocation of the Nile's waters, and the apportioning of debt.

The Small Arms Survey, based at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, has raised concerns about the possibility of armed conflict and the resumption of civil war over the division of oilfields that lie along the border between the North and South.

"Any future military confrontations between the parties to the CPA are highly likely to be around the oilfields, despite the risks to oil production", it warns.

The South currently has approximately 82 percent of Sudan's oilfields, but this could rise to as high as 95 percent if two disputed fields along the border, Heglig and Bamboo, are included in the South, according to the Small Arms Survey. Oil produced in the South and the border region is exported northwards to Port Sudan on the Red Sea, though China, currently Sudan's key oil partner, has looked at an alternative route south through Kenya.

Last year approximately 2,500 people were killed and a further 350,000 displaced due to clashes in the border region, according to the United Nations.



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