Sudan: A tale of blood and oil in Africa

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Media reports of the referendum to determine whether the southern provinces of Sudan should secede have taken on a celebratory character, even before the polls close at the end of the week. The same tone is assumed in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* written by President Barack Obama.

This "historic vote is an exercise in self-determination long in the making," he declares. "A successful vote will be cause for celebration and an inspiring step forward in Africa's long journey toward democracy and justice."

Such statements are mendacious. There is no doubt enthusiasm for secession in the south, in the hope that a line can be drawn under the decades-long civil war between the north and the south. Two million people have died in the conflict that began at the moment of independence in 1956 and continued until 2005, with the last 21 years being the most destructive. The number of those displaced is close to 4 million. Generations have been raised in refugee camps.

But the referendum has nothing to do with self-determination, peace or democracy. It is dictated by the efforts of the United States to gain strategic advantage in relation to China, which dominates the Sudanese oil industry, some 80 percent of which is located in the south. Its aim is the creation of a puppet state which will become a platform for US domination of the entire region.

The separation of the south and creation of a new capitalist state will only perpetuate religious and ethnic conflict, with the most likely outcome being a resumption of warfare. Already more than 30 people have been reported killed in clashes on the proposed border between the north and a new state in the south.

The US is fully aware of such a possibility. Washington has been arming and training the southern Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in preparation for a possible future assault on Khartoum in the north, which the US would support. This is the threat underscoring Obama's veiled warnings to the government of Omar al-Bashir that "if you fulfil your obligations and choose peace, there is a path to normal relations with the United States, including the lifting of economic sanctions and beginning the process, in accordance with United States law, of removing Sudan from the list of states that sponsor terrorism. In contrast, those who flout their international obligations will face more pressure and isolation."

The 50-plus states that now exist in Africa and their borders are all stamped by the historic intrigues of the former colonial powers. Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, etc., marked the present-day borders to designate their spheres of influence against their rivals, and often drew them up precisely to encourage and exploit ethnic conflicts as part of a strategy of divide, conquer and rule. This is a legacy of the 19th century "scramble for Africa" with enduring consequences.

The proposed creation of a state in southern Sudan has no less ignoble a pedigree than the earlier creation of the Republic of Biafra during the Nigerian civil war.

Like Sudan, Nigeria's borders were determined by the rival claims of the imperialist powers. Following independence in 1960, the country was torn by conflict between the semi-autonomous Muslim feudal states in the desert north and Christian and animist kingdoms in the south and east, where the country's oil reserves were located. In 1967, the eastern region's military rulers declared the independence of Biafra—provoking a war in which 1 million civilians were killed before Biafra was reabsorbed into Nigeria.

Britain, the former colonial power, did not recognise Biafra and was unmoved by the plight of the Ibo people because it wanted to safeguard the profits of Shell Oil, which were bound up with London's relations with the Nigerian state. Washington also backed Nigeria.

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France, Portugal, Israel, Rhodesia, South Africa and the Vatican provided support to the Biafran secessionists.

One must also recall the terrible history of imperial intrigues in Sudan itself. From the 1880s, Britain attempted to gain control over Sudan to prevent France from annexing a region that controlled the headwaters of the Nile. Sudan became a British colony in 1898 after wholesale massacres of African troops.

The present north-south divide is a legacy of British rule. Britain pitted one tribal, ethnic and religious group against another. Obama is following in the footsteps of the British in exacerbating such divisions.

Diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks document the way in which the US has secretly funnelled arms to the south while publicly talking about peace. Under the 2005 peace accord, which ended the civil war, the US is allowed to provide non-lethal equipment and training for the SPLA. WikiLeaks confirmed that a cargo of tanks, grenade launchers and anti-aircraft guns captured by Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden in 2008 was destined for southern Sudan, and not Kenya as the US claimed at the time. The arms shipment was part of efforts to arm the SPLA in readiness for the current referendum and secession.

The focus of US policy in Africa is its hostility to the rise of China. WikiLeaks published comments from US Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Johnnie Carson on China's presence in Africa, in which he identified what he called “tripwires” that would trigger a US military response: “Have they signed military base agreements? Are they training armies? Have they developed intelligence operations? Once these areas start developing then the US will start worrying.”

Carson continued: “China is not in Africa for altruistic reasons. China is in Africa primarily for China.”

The same, of course, is true of America, and it is the US, not China, which is leading the way in a military build-up and in supplying arms to regimes throughout the continent.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates has recently voiced his concern about growing Chinese military capabilities. Ahead of a trip to Beijing, Gates warned that the US would enhance its military power in response to China's increasing military investment. “We have to respond appropriately with our own programs,” he threatened.

The US is initiating an arms race in Africa, which, thanks to its oil and mineral resources, is primed to become one of the strategic battlefields in the unfolding struggle for the re-division of the world.

The masses of Sudan and the whole of the African continent are being made hostages to the predatory designs of the major powers and the local elites who function as their proxies. The pressing need is for the development of a mass political movement of the African working class and peasantry, dedicated to the socialist liberation of the continent in alliance with the working class of the US, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

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