Sudan on the Rebound?
By Zachariah Mampilly | TheRoot.com

Chinese motorcycles, high-speed Internet and Kangol hats. Welcome to the new South Sudan.

Nov. 13, 2008—Returning to Sudan after three years away, I guess I wasn't quite ready for how things have evolved. On my commercial flight from Entebbe, Uganda, to Juba—the new capital of the semiautonomous region of South Sudan—I sat next to an overweight Somali man with henna-tinged hair and beard. He was puzzled that I wondered about the availability of electricity, cell phones and the Internet, all things that seemed so out of reach in the region when I first went there in 2004. For him, Juba was a promising business opportunity, and he seemed annoyed that I didn't understand this, not to mention disappointed when I told him I was merely an academic coming to do research.

Peace has come to South Sudan, and the towns are booming. Indians, Chinese, Diasporic Sudanese, South Africans and especially Somalis, Ugandans and Kenyans abound everywhere. People in South Sudan like peace—they lived under rebel control during the war, and they have no intention of returning to battle, though it remains a clear, if distant, possibility. But for now, the beers flow, the markets bustle. Auto rickshaws from India ply the roads alongside Chinese motorcycles. Men who lived much of the past 20 years in the bush come to the city markets wearing robes and Kangols to buy radios, cheap CD players and jeans.

One thing almost no one talks about is Darfur. The only time it comes up is as a potential spoiler to the hard-earned peace agreement that ended 20 years of fighting in a war that left 2.5 million dead and many more millions displaced. The 2005 agreement between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) specified a number of concrete steps to prevent a return to battle. The first two: Sudan would hold a national election in which the one-time rebels would be eligible to compete as a political party, and it would hold a referendum on whether the South should begin proceedings to formally secede from the Sudanese state.

The national election is scheduled for 2009 and the referendum for two years later. On the face of it, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the political party birthed by the former rebel movement, has little incentive to compete nationally. It could instead bide its time until 2011, when almost everyone in South Sudan believes the referendum will put the region on the path to secession. But surprisingly, the SPLM has been working assiduously to build a national coalition composed of Sudan's many disaffected communities (including Darfuris) that can compete in, and win, the national election of 2009.

The chances of an SPLM victory are complicated by a number of factors. Premier among these is the likelihood that the National Congress Party, which currently rules the country with an iron fist, could cancel the election or perpetrate massive election fraud. In addition, the SPLM may not have mustered sufficient support outside of the South. Furthermore, the SPLA's own contemptible behavior during the war has led many other groups to worry about life in Sudan under the control of the former rebel leaders.
But there are a few things that make an SPLM victory possible. Unlike political parties in other parts of the world that have little ability to challenge a ruling party that chooses to steal an election, the SPLM can count on the military power of the SPLA, which has retained its weaponry and is willing, though reluctant, to go back to war. And as I heard repeatedly during my recent visit, the SPLM has devoted considerable attention to building a national coalition that will probably be competitive in the upcoming election.

So what should the international community be doing? First, it must not do anything that could undermine the possibility of a national election taking place. I am speaking, of course, of the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant issued in July against Sudan's president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, accusing him of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity for his despicable actions in Darfur. Recently, judges at the ICC refused to issue an arrest warrant for Bashir, asking the chief prosecutor to provide more evidence before going forward.

Though a noble aspiration, the ICC has failed thus far to prove its ability to intervene objectively into political situations. Instead, there is a common perception in Sudan and elsewhere that the ICC is one more tool for powerful states such as the United States (which has yet to ratify the treaty recognizing the court) to impose their will on weaker nations. The court's behavior in Sudan, coming on the heels of its ongoing charade in neighboring Uganda, again demonstrates the political nature of its actions, especially in Africa. Hinging our hopes on the ICC to bring peace to Sudan is misguided and reflects a tendency within the international community to use Africa as a testing ground for unproven, biased and ineffective interventions.

Instead, the international community's approach to Sudan should be driven solely by a clear understanding of the political situation in the country. In my view, the first step is to negotiate with Bashir, promising to revoke the warrant and grant him a minimal degree of legitimacy if he allows the election to go forward. If Americans find this distasteful, then reach out to our Arab allies for assistance, many of whom continue to have close relations with Sudan and continue to direct considerable investments to the country. Second, ensure that disaffected groups in Sudan understand that the SPLM has considerable support from donor nations and that a victory by the party would trigger a massive influx of development aid directed precisely to areas of the country long neglected by Khartoum. The Southern rebels have been a favored recipient of U.S. aid for some time, so this policy would not cost much more than has already been invested. And announcing that an SPLM victory would be rewarded would provide the party with a greater incentive as it continues to reach out to Sudan's many disaffected groups. It would also reassure those groups wary of the former rebels that the international community is watching and that the former rebels must take seriously the task of transforming Sudan into a democratic and open society as they've consistently promised to do.

Negotiating with a dictator, particularly one involved in the types of crimes that Bashir has committed, is never a very tasteful option. But consider the most possible likely alternative—a Balkanized Sudan composed of several small, divided states, all armed and hostile to their neighbors. If the SPLM has even a small chance to keep Sudan united and bring peace to this long-suffering country, then it behooves the international community to at least give it a chance to work things out internally.
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