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A new state in Africa: South Sudan

In 2011, the South Sudanese people voted on the question of independence for their region, which is about two and a half times the area of the UK. Chances were that the people would vote for an independent state – and they did. They did so, even though the citizens of the new state are neither united by the same language, nor by the same religion nor were they ever called ‘South Sudanese people’ (by themselves or others) beforehand. In fact, they were identified as Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Azande, Acholi and so on. Hence, those characteristics are missing that nationalists worldwide think of as crucial with regard to the founding of a state. Their common ground is merely negative. They have never been the ideal national citizens the various regimes of the (north-) Sudanese state propagated since its formation: neither were they Arab-speaking nor followers of Islam.

British colonial power had largely separated the south from the Arabic north. But when releasing the state into independence in 1956, it insisted that the Islamic-Arabic north and the “black African” south should form a united state. The reason was the fear that an independent northern Sudan would become a satellite state of the Pan Arabic and, at that time, Soviet-friendly, Egypt. Most of the time from then on (1955-1972 and 1983-2005), there was a war going on. At times the rebels demanded autonomy within Sudan; at times they demanded independence from the North. The government in the North for its part again and again tried to enforce Islamic law on the people in or from the South.

In 2005, a peace agreement between the government and the largest rebel group, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and its political arm, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM – in the following, both are abbreviated together as SPLM/A), was achieved through mediation due to pressure from the western states. The two parties agreed on autonomy for the south and an equal sharing of raw materials revenues. At first, the southern rebels indicated they would relinquish Southern Sudanese independence if the government respected the autonomy agreement. However, after the accidental death of their leader, John Garang, in 2005, the SPLA/M continuously worked towards independence. Since the referendum, as expected, led to secession, a taboo of politics in post-colonial Africa was broken: the unrevisable borders set out by colonial powers.¹ It might not have been the last instance of breaking that taboo, since by granting preferential treatment to the Arab-speaking Muslims – who constituted 42% of the population, at least until the separation – the Sudanese state caused the development of further autonomy efforts in Darfur and on the Red Sea coast. Meanwhile, several missions of the UN and the African Union have been running in the country to oversee the peace in Darfur and the South. But the most serious consequence of the referendum for the North is the withdrawal of substantial parts of its economic foundations: raw materials.

The economy

What would economically sustain the new South Sudanese state was clear even before statehood. Namely, what the previously Arab-Muslim dominated north Sudan has lived from: the export of oil available in vast quantities in the South. One of the reasons for the rebellion in the south was the fact that oil production destroyed the subsistence economy of the population, while profits

from the export never benefited the southern region. Moreover, the government planned to redirect water from the southern springs to the dry north for agricultural purposes. The rebels retaliated with attempts to sabotage oil production. After Sudan had fallen out of favour with the West, China secured itself a privileged position in oil production. With the profits from oil exports Sudan in turn bought Chinese weapons² in order to keep the rebels from the oil fields.

Sudan is a country in which the capitalist economy is decreed by law, but there is hardly any capitalist economy. Chinese oil companies bring their own employees. The bourgeoisie trades imported goods. There is one other option for job seekers: working in the state apparatus (thanks to numerous regional conflicts, its armed division is not exactly small). In this occupation, one is less affected by nature, climate change, the state and hostile neighbouring “tribes” than with subsistence economy. Therefore, positions in the state apparatus are much sought after and usually given to loyal Arab-speaking Muslims – which again makes this group interested in the success of its employer, the state. Other groups are often less interested in its success. This is what Sudanese citizens have in common with the populations of most other African states – an important difference from the citizens of well-functioning capitalist countries in the West, whose own success in the field of economic competition is necessarily linked to the success of their state. Peasants – as opposed to wage labourers – can generally be indifferent about the state, because they are not used by capital, which requires a state as guarantor of business. All of these problems linger on with South Sudan’s independence. What will change, however, are the privileged groups in the state apparatus (Dinka instead of Arabs) and the benefiting major powers (EU instead of China).

Oil profits must be shared with the rest of Sudan, especially as the whole infrastructure for the export is located in the north. The powers that facilitated the independence of the south are working to address these shortcomings. German companies are building a railway line for the oil from the south to be brought through politically reliable countries to the ports of East Africa. In this way the new state would be able to deny oil access to the rest of Sudan which in turn could allow the West to increase the pressure on the government in Khartoum as well as – probably much more importantly – strike against rising Chinese power. The discovery of new oil reserves in the south make South Sudan even more interesting for the U.S. and the EU – in addition to the economic benefits of the oil itself, the control of the oil wells means the political weakening of those states that are trying to advance their position in world politics as oil exporters.

The founding party

Like so many “liberation movements” of the so-called Third World, the SPLA/M presented itself as being in some way left-wing and socialist at its founding in 1983. Since then, the SPLA/M has allowed itself to be supported by, amongst others, such different powers as Libya, (the state socialist) Ethiopia, Israel, Uganda and Egypt. When Sudan was put on the list of terrorist supporters by the United States in the 1990s, the SPLA/M was getting more and more help from the No. 1 world power – which led their sympathies for socialism to fall quickly. The pressure of the rebels was supposed to shake the regime in Khartoum.

For a long time, the SPLA/M was indecisive about whether they would prefer to fight for independence for the south or for the overthrow of the military regime in Khartoum. During the civil war, the southerners supply chains were cut off by the government again and again and for decades they experienced the Sudanese state as a hostile power. The SPLA/M had managed to establish itself as a de facto sovereign in the rural areas and saw the coming state as their own

project. Already during the negotiations in 2005, the SPLA/M began to discuss the expansion of the term “South Sudan”. While the government defined the “South” along the lines of British administrative units, the SPLA/M also saw the neighbouring, resource-rich provinces with many “black African” residents as part of the South. The areas where the cattle nomads of the “black” Dinka graze their flocks should also be allowed to vote in the referendum on the independence according to the SPLA/M’s definition. Since there was no consensus reached on this question, the status of some provinces is still unresolved – and the referendum there is pending. The Arab-speaking and government-loyal Misseriya nomads, who live in the same areas, are seen as foreign occupiers by the state founders of the SPLA/M. The fight for the extremely oil-rich region of Abyei³

seems lost to the SPLA/M for now – the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague has given most of the territory, including the oil fields, to the Khartoum government. The SPLA/M officially accepted the decision, but continues to move their troops into the region. The affiliation of the provinces of South Kordofan and Blue Nile has successfully been called into question by the SPLA/M – where there was also a vote on independence –, but it was not allowed to act as a quasi-state power there before the referendum had taken place. In the rest of the south, however, they could do so. In 2012, the government in the north had conquered vast parts of the disputed territory, which resulted in a new flow of refugees.

There, the process of nation and state formation shows itself in all its glory. First, the state apparatus is built with international assistance, where all the heroes of the war of independence are accommodated. Whereas the SPLA/M has been outraged by the over-representation of Arabs in the Khartoum state apparatus, the South Sudanese state apparatus is now mainly occupied by Dinka – the group that also forms the entire leadership of the SPLA/M.

The process of state formation entails the classification into reliable and less reliable citizens: the foundation of minority parties who rebel against the domination of the Dinka are denounced by the SPLA/M as agents of the North. Nomads with “incorrect” language or religion are prevented from accessing water and pastures. Arabs in the South, whose families came to the region after the independence of Sudan in 1956, were not allowed to vote in the referendum. On the way to independence it also happened that an activist of the Communist Party of Sudan – former allies of the SPLA/M under the National Democratic Alliance⁴ – went to jail for putting up their posters. The CP has not even agitated in favour of Communism (which would include the abolition of states), but for a common fight against the regime of the dictator Al-Bashir in Khartoum on behalf of secular democracy. According to the Sudanese Communists the Sharia law should be fought against by all residents of Sudan regardless of their religious or ethnic identity. That fits poorly with the concept of the SPLA/M, which justifies its independence project precisely with the differences in identities. Otherwise, the SPLA/M is busy trying to demobilise its troops under international control – according to some data they are now twice as strong as at the time of the peace agreement in 2005 (i.e. at the beginning of the demobilisation). From time to time, you will also hear that Somali pirates have hijacked a ship with tanks that were intended for arms embargoed South Sudan. The autonomy government spends about 40% of its budget on armed and security forces.

Thus, SPLA/M has everything you need for the foundation of a state in the so-called Third World: military power, export products interesting for the First World, cadres for the state apparatus and the blessing of a few world powers.

The enemy

The (North) Sudanese government, which came into power in 1989 after a coup by the military and Islamists, has used just about every means available in the fight against their unruly citizens. Military attacks and campaigns for islamisation were combined with the decimation of disloyal population groups by denying humanitarian assistance in the midst of a famine. Market reforms in accordance with the IMF (with whom the Islamists got along splendidly) also contributed to economic hardship. In addition, Khartoum repeatedly managed to split the rebels, to integrate some fractions within the government and to send their supporters in the fight against the SPLA/M. Members of loyal groups were not only allowed to fight their rebellious neighbours on their own account, but also to enrich themselves with their property and abduct them into slavery. When nomads lost their livestock due to a drought, looting of other “tribes” and guarding oil fields against rebels became their new basis of existence.

For now the government seems to have accepted the separation of the South. World public opinion is puzzled: is this the beginning of the end of the North Sudanese regime, because the SPLA/M has given the go-ahead for state dissolution by various separatists or is the regime now being stabilised since the SPLA/M was the most powerful opposition group? President Al-Bashir, against whom an international arrest warrant for genocide is outstanding (the result of his attempts to maintain the state), would rather not have a direct conflict with the West. Some Islamists disappointedly turn away from attempts to convert the south to the true faith and prefer a core Sudan with fewer resources but without minorities. There they hope to finally realise their Sharia utopia. The opposition, however, feels let down by the SPLA/M. But the next dispute already dawns between the government and the south, namely about what should happen with the refugees from the South who now live in the big cities of the north. The SPLA/M wants to ensure that the electoral registers for the referendum only lists those people whose commitment to independence they can rely on. Similarly, the north-south battle is about determining the voting rights of Arabs living in the South. Depending on their respective interests, the government and the SPLA/M either apply the geographical or the ethnic factor. It will be interesting to know, which state may soon count whom as its subjects.

1 There was one other case of secession in Africa since 1945: the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1993.

2 In 2005, Western countries had instituted an arms embargo on Sudan.

3 Where the fighting is on again since 7 January 2011.

4 The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is an umbrella organisation of the opposition, which has been established after the coup of the military and the Muslim Brotherhood in 1989. It includes former government parties (Umma, Democratic Unionist Party), regional autonomy movements (SPLA/M, Beja Congress, Rashida Free Lions) and left nationalists (Ba’ath Party). On the subject of secession, the NDA could never come to an agreement.