

No substitute for real carrots: Resolving the civil war in Sudan

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(views presented are solely those of the author, and not the organizations with which the author is affiliated)

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Interest in resolving Sudan's long civil war and democratizing the repressive regime in Khartoum has waned. The peace talks in Kenya continue in desultory fashion, but outside mediators, especially the United States and Europe, have lost interest. This is a mistake, for many reasons.

First, the United States remains well-regarded by many in both the north and south, with no national culture of laying blame for state failure at the doorstep of a U.S. betrayal (a la Liberia). Everyone recognizes that the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), led by John Garang, and the military junta in Khartoum are the real thing, not puppets of the international system. So the U.S. can continue to play a positive role.

Second, the Sudanese civil war will be easier to solve than many of the wars afflicting the continent, particularly the nasty wars that have engulfed Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, and Somalia. The leaders of these wars routinely use random terror, ethnic 'othering' and discourses of hatred to rally their troops of disaffected youngsters. The war in Sudan seems positively old-fashioned next to these wars, with 'root causes', well-educated negotiators, and constitutional wrangling. Most Sudanese think their war will remain 'civilized', but millennial jihadists are biding their time in villages all over the country. One of them will make his move, and convince an army captain to take power, and that will be the beginning of the end.

Third, the domino theory of Middle East democratization can be tested and implemented more cheaply in Sudan. The Arabic-speaking and largely Muslim north of the country retains a vibrant civil society that the current military junta, led by Omar al-Bashir, seems unable to crush. The junta cannily plays this civil society, granting a few concessions here, taking away a few there. The lack of credible alternative slogans or personalities limits the ability of civil society to coalesce into a powerful democratization movement. But disparate voices do get heard, and resonate with the desire of ordinary civilians in northern Sudan for a return to civil liberties and civil discourses. Thus, Sudan is very different from Iraq, where Baathists and Shia mullahs convert civilians into advocates for intolerance.

The peace negotiations underway in Kenya are currently failing because the two parties to the talks, the military junta and the SPLA, face little domestic pressure for peace. Both are largely unaccountable to the populations they control. Both have unimaginative leaders who have entrenched

themselves in power by playing the dictator game. So outsiders need to provide the vision, much as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Until now, the outside mediators to the peace talks have concentrated on sticks and... let's call them orange-colored foodstuffs. The sticks are obvious: many members of the military regime are under sanctions by the U.S. Treasury, and the northern government receives little aid. The orange-colored foodstuffs consist of generalized talk of peace dividends, economic growth, and better health statistics. How many peasants in Kordofan, or shanty dwellers in Omdurman, can touch, see, and taste dividends, growth or statistics?

To be a real carrot, a proposal has to be edible and delicious. Deciding on what carrots to offer requires imagination and verve, and a taste for sloganeering. Let me jumpstart the process with a modest "Contract for Sudan" that has three simple proposals. First, a school and library, for every village in Sudan. The building costs might be around \$200 million for 10,000 villages, and recurrent salary costs, at \$2,000 per year per village, are a modest \$20 million. Second, full status as citizens for every person in Sudan, including a brand-new passport with the new bill of rights reproduced in Arabic and English. Nothing motivates women and illiterate folks more than the thought that their rights as citizens are going to be respected, and nothing makes a villager prouder than documentary proof that he is a 'person'. This might be expensive: at \$50 per passport, we are talking \$1.5 billion. Third, a functioning railway, television, and national cell phone infrastructure. Surely we can do that for under \$100 million? So the total cost would be around \$2 billion. In return every rural Sudanese person get a school and library, trains and phones that work, and a passport. I guarantee you that is already more than what every ordinary person in Sudan expects to see in their lifetime.

Except for the cell phones, because already people in remote areas are taking them for granted. So we better hurry if we want to buy some cheap carrots, and offer them up as the reward for peace. These carrots, or something like them, should be put, very publicly, on the negotiating table. The ordinary person in Sudan needs to go to bed every night saying: "If only those guys signed the peace agreement, we could have a new school in the village this year." That is when the domestic pressures for peace will grow, and the negotiators will stop their delaying tactics and sign on a dotted line.