

The 2010 Sudanese Election

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Polls in Sudan opened 11 April 2010 for the first time in 24 years. That the Sudanese were voting at all was considered a major milestone in some circles. In the view of many, both Sudanese and non-Sudanese alike, the elections were nothing more than an exercise aimed at providing legitimacy for the incumbent president and the ruling party. A more nuanced view, though, would see the elections as both a sham and an important moment for understanding the problems that the Sudan, and Sudanese, faces. Let's begin with the sham.

On the face of it, the presidential elections are a sham. Al-Bashir became the only major presidential candidate when in the week leading up to the polls Yasir Armin, the SPLM presidential candidate, withdrew. Armin cited the potential for major violence between rival supporters as the reason for his decision to stand aside. This move ensured al-Bashir would be returned as president with a large majority. Armin's decision also ensured that many voters would shun the presidential race, instead focusing on the regional and local elections that were being held at the same time as the presidential poll. The complexity of the election process was another reason why some analysts and observers considered the elections to be intrinsically flawed. In some areas of the southern Sudan, voters had to decide on presidential, parliamentary, gubernatorial, and local elections, and vote in three different electoral systems at each level of government. In terms of the presidential and parliamentary elections, ballot papers had been printed and distributed before some of the candidates had withdrawn their candidature.

This has led to confusion, symbolized by a comment by one voter who when asked about the elections said that he had voted for the SPLM presidential candidate Yasir Armin, even though Armin had withdrawn from the elections. In Darfur province, where many hundreds of thousand of people remained in limbo, either in refugee camps or in the major urban centres such as al-Fashir, after being displaced from their homes by the violence of the past decade, voting has been irregular, in terms of both meanings of the word.

Confusion and complexity aside, the elections strained the infrastructure and resources of Africa's largest and one of the world's most fractious countries, leading some Sudanese to suggest that the elections were not only a sham but a huge waste of money and resources; money and resources that could have been spent on raising the living standards of the Sudanese and addressing the huge problems the country faces. From this perspective, democracy is not the panacea for a country's troubles and democracy should be seen as an end result of a process that builds material, human and social capital in a country before embarking on the costly and potentially divisive process of competitive elections. So, cynics and critics alike condemn the elections as unlikely to bring any positive change to the Sudan.

However, other views also exist. In particular, there is a strong element of support for Al-Bashir in Sudan who believes that he needs international and domestic legitimacy to carry on his work. Al-Bashir's supporters see him as the leader that brought an end to the north-south war and who has overseen the development boom (albeit from oil) that has radically changed the face of Khartoum and they hope will trickle down to other parts of the country. They argue that the fact that the Sudan is even holding a national election with international monitors, including former US president Jimmy Carter, is a huge step forward for a country that has only had five elections in fifty-five years of independence. Supporters of al-Bashir point to the fact that there has been little violence in the lead-up to the poll and only isolated incidents during the poll. al-Bashir has been very clever in making the poll mostly a referendum on the sovereign rights of the Sudan by arguing that a vote against him is a vote for the International Criminal Court indictment, and a vote for international interference in the sovereign affairs of the Sudan.

Even those Sudanese who dislike al-Bashir see a vote for him as an opportunity to tell the ICC (which many Sudanese would see as an agent of the west, and an imperial west at that) to leave Sudan's problems to the Sudanese. Of course, there are many Sudanese, including many refugees from Darfur, who welcome the ICC's decision but this is outweighed by the large number of northerners who regard al-Bashir, whether they like him or not, as the president of the sovereign Sudan, and for that reasons, the decision to remove him from power, they believe, must come from the Sudanese themselves and not from foreign interference. In any final analysis of the election results a closer inspection of the composition of the ministry and the nature of the political appointments that follow the election will also need to be taken into account, and in fact, may tell us

more about the future of politics in Sudan than the actual election results. There is some speculation, for example, that al-Bashir will form an alliance that brings together Darfuri and southern political leaders with his ruling NCP party. If this does occur, it will be the first time that any Sudanese president has managed to form an alliance of this type, one that cuts across the major regional divisions of the country, and this might be the most important milestone. Whether this is enough to address the major issues of poverty and disunity that plague Sudan, only time will tell. Either way, the recent events in Sudan have shown that it takes more than elections to solve a country's ills. It takes political will, material resources and international support, and not the lip-service to democracy that has accompanied the neo-liberal assault on African sovereignty.

African countries require genuine international support for rebuilding the essential infrastructure of the state - the administrative, institutional and juridical infrastructure - that provides states with the key material and human capital required to begin to address the major challenges of unemployment, malnutrition, law and order, health care and education. Al-Bashir's certain landslide victory may be marred by claims of fraud or lauded for fairness, but for the Sudanese the elections will mean very little, because before elections can have any meaning in the Sudan, or any where else in Africa, the governments people elect must have effective state institutions over which they can govern and have the capacity to enact policies that can bring genuine material changes to peoples lives. It will be at this point, and not beforehand, that the Sudan will pass a major milestone, and when it will become a democracy.