

Al-Bashir Losing Grip on Unity Government

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Continuing disagreement over power-sharing and south's vast oil revenues are behind latest political crisis. The recent decision by South Sudan's leader Salva Kiir to withdraw from the coalition government in Sudan, formed in 2005 after more than 20 years of civil war, may threaten a fragile peace in the war-ravaged region.

Likewise, it could lead to the emergence a second front for the government of Sudan president Omar al-Bashir, which is already struggling with rebels in its western Darfur region.

Kiir has set January 9, the third anniversary of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA, for al-Bashir to comply with provisions of the accord.

Kiir has accused al-Bashir of failing to follow the 2005 pact that created a power sharing government and divided the south's vast oil revenues.

At worst, the growing chasm between north and south Sudan threatens to rekindle Sudan's bloody civil war that killed an estimated 1.5 million. It could also kill any hopes either the north or south had of capitalising on Sudan's vast oil reserves.

At best, it is simply a war of words, though neither side seems to be backing down.

For his part, al-Bashir says he is not interested in going back to war. Rather, he has said he intends to keep the unity government functioning.

"Enormous efforts have been [made] in order to come to the peace agreement which [achieves] freedom, democracy and good governance," al-Bashir told a conference of his National Congress Party on November 21 in Khartoum.

Al-Bashir said dialogue was the best option to settle differences.

Despite those assurances, he put forces in the south on alert earlier this month, calling for popular militias to resume training.

That order came after the semi-autonomous Government of South Sudan walked away from the coalition government on October 11, saying al-Bashir has marginalised the south.

Al-Bashir can ill afford a second conflict in his country, now grappling with Darfuri rebel groups in a war that has claimed an estimated 200,000 lives and displaced nearly two million.

The International Criminal Court, ICC, has indicted al-Bashir's minister for humanitarian affairs, Muhammed Harun, along with Ali Kushayb, a leader of the janjaweed militia, for war crimes and crimes against humanity in connection with the Darfur conflict.

After the CPA was concluded, Kiir was named the first vice president of the unity government, second in authority to al-Bashir. His appointment came after the sudden death of John Garang in 2005, just months after the agreement had been signed.

The deal created a unity government for six years that would be followed by a referendum in the south in which residents there would vote for or against independence from Sudan.

The unity government was made up of 74 ministers and presidential advisors, with the CPA granting al-Bashir's party 52 per cent of these appointments and the South's Sudanese People Liberation Movement 28 per cent.

Of critical importance, however, is that revenues from the oil-rich Abyei region are to be shared with 50 per cent going to the national government and 42 percent to the south. The remaining portions are divided among other entities.

Further, a special commission was to mark the boundaries of the Abyei region, and presented a report to al-Bashir.

The Abyei Border Commission presented its report to al-Bashir earlier this year, but he rejected it because it indicated that Abyei, which includes most of the country's oil resources, would be part of South Sudan.

Al-Bashir's government apparently is worried that if Abyei is allocated to the south, his government would lose its valuable revenue if southerners voted for independence in the country's planned 2011 referendum.

Al-Bashir's advisor on diplomatic affairs, Mustafa Osman Ismail, said the ruling National Congress Party would not change its position that Abyei belongs to the north.

If it would remain under northern control, the possible independence of the south is less critical to the north.

The Juba Post newspaper quoted Osman as saying, "Even if the SPLM (Sudan People's Liberation Movement) does not return to the Government of National Unity, there will be no constitutional vacuum and the government will remain legitimate."

Pagan Amum, secretary general of the SPLM, said more than 15,000 central government troops, the Sudan Armed Forces, surround the oil regions. These forces were to have withdrawn to the north in July of this year.

This also apparently violates the agreement, which called for the Abyei oil fields to be guarded by a joint

force of some 39,000 troops, equally divided between the north and the south.

Sudan's military officials said the northern forces were not withdrawn because joint force was not available, according to Major Gen. Kuol Deim Kuol, of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, SPLA.

Kuol responded that "the JIU (Joint Integrated Units) are available in all the areas of Upper Nile and Bentiu. That is just an outright violation of the Security Arrangement Protocol".

Of equal concern is an apparent lack of transparency in oil revenue. Pagan Amum claimed the South Sudan has not been given details concerning the oil revenue produced from southern wells.

Kiir also criticised al-Bashir for his refusal to appoint more ministers from the south to the unity government. Although al-Bashir finally relented and made the appointments, Kiir told the appointees not to start work until all grievances were resolved.

Kiir also defended himself against accusations from al-Bashir's government that Kiir's visit was not authorised by them. This was countered by United States officials who said that permissions had been granted.

Kiir also denied that his visit with President George Bush had any sinister motives or was part of a conspiracy.

"I have no reason to do that because I am part of Sudan, and you can not conspire against yourself," said Kiir, adding that the visit was in the interests of peace and stability in the region.

"The SPLA under my leadership will not take the people back to war," he went on, assuring people that he would resist any efforts by some to dismantle the peace agreement with a return to hostilities.

Despite those assurances, Kiir gave al-Bashir's government until January 9 to resolve the South's grievances or it would take further measures.

Kiir indicated that he may turn to the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, IGAD, which is a regional group assigned to respond to problems with the peace agreement. It consists of Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea.

Additionally, the US, Britain and the UN could be involved since they helped bring about the peace talks.

Meanwhile, al-Bashir has vowed to support fair and free elections and the participation of all political parties in the country next year.

He said he will work to maintain the unity government and that resettlement of thousands of displaced southerners, now living in camps near Khartoum, would be one of his top priorities in the coming year.

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