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Secession and Precedent in Sudan and Africa

Summary

- African leaders have recently expressed concern that the possible division of Sudan may lead to a domino effect of other secessions on the continent—but closer analysis questions how likely this may be.
- Africa's borders are largely accepted; it is only a distinct few cases (including Sudan) in which they could be reconsidered.
- While there are many secession movements in Africa, most are weak and few stand a real chance of success, or have the international support they would need to advance their cause. This minimizes the likelihood of a wave of follow-on secessions if Southern Sudan chooses to secede.

“ [T]here is not a lot of evidence that other secession movements would succeed in following suit. To argue that the breakup of Sudan would be followed by other secessions, there must be other secession movements positioned to do so. But today there are no other movements in Africa with the history, local following and international support comparable to that of Southern Sudan. ”

Introduction

“A ‘yes’ vote could...stimulate ethnic secessionist movements from Cairo to Cape Town...the impact of their new status may be catastrophic elsewhere on the continent, where secessionist tendencies have hitherto been held back by the international community's refusal to recognize new nations”¹

“...independence will encourage secessionists in other African countries. Angola, Cameroon, Senegal and South Africa all face potential splits.”²

If these words were written today, one would assume they were about Sudan and the prospect that Southern Sudanese will vote to secede in the coming January referendum. But they were written in 1993, and the subject was the pending secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia.

Back then, politicians and commentators feared that the internationally sanctioned creation of a new state in Africa would set a dangerous precedent and encourage other secession movements. Today, similar fears are heard concerning the possible division of Sudan. “What is happening in Sudan could become a contagious disease that affects the whole of Africa,”³ Libyan leader Col. Muammar Gaddafi recently warned. On another occasion, he predicted “the beginning of the crack in Africa's map.”⁴ Algeria's foreign minister added “this partitioning will have fatal repercussions on the African continent.”⁵ Chadian President Idriss Deby cautioned, “we all have a north and south. If we accept the breakup of Sudan, the domino effect will be inevitable and it would be a disaster for the continent.”⁶

But will it? Predictions of disaster following Eritrea's secession were overstated—the Ethiopia-Eritrea war that followed was catastrophic, but there was no subsequent surge in secessionist efforts elsewhere in Africa. Is there likely to be such a surge if Southern Sudanese vote to secede?

Norms and Borders

Any secession in Africa challenges the long-held norm of accepting borders drawn by colonial powers, illogical as some of them may be. This principle of *uti possidetis* (Latin for “as you possess”) was enshrined by participants in a meeting of the Organization of African Unity in 1964, whose final declaration “solely declares that all Member States pledge themselves to respect the borders existing on their achievement of national independence.”⁷ In the 1960s this made sense: African states were brand new, weak and looking to ensure their very existence. When Biafra (in Nigeria) and Katanga (in the Democratic Republic of Congo) tried to break away from their mother states in the 1960s, it was prudent to discourage their secession given the weakness of those states and the confusion that could have resulted from their secession given that other African states were only then coming into existence. At the time, it was important to establish the principle that colonial borders would stand.

But 50 years later, the context is different. Most African states are well-established and their borders are accepted. By and large, the map of Africa is settled. The borders governing just a few states, however, are persistently problematic, none more so than Sudan.

If Southern Sudanese vote to secede and gain their independence, it will be the most significant redrawing of African borders since decolonization. Eritrea, though strategically located given its access to the Red Sea, is small and somewhat peripheral to the rest of the continent. Sudan, on the contrary, is the largest physical country on the continent and borders nine other states. Dividing it in two would be a seismic cartographic shift.

Even so, there is not a lot of evidence that other secession movements would succeed in following suit. To argue that the breakup of Sudan would be followed by other secessions, there must be other secession movements positioned to do so. But today there are no other movements in Africa with the history, local following and international support comparable to that of Southern Sudan.

Standards for Secession

Secession movements elsewhere in Africa exist today in Casamance (Senegal), Cabinda (Angola), Zanzibar (Tanzania), Somaliland (Somalia) and Western Sahara (the disputed territory bordering Morocco). They are the same movements that were cited as potentially “next to secede” when Eritrea gained independence. With the exception of Somaliland, none of these movements are stronger now than they were in the 1990s. In fact, many are weaker; secession movements in Casamance, Cabinda and Zanzibar have been relatively inactive in recent years.

With the exception of Western Sahara, the people and rebels of these other secessionist regions have not been through what those in Southern Sudan and Eritrea have endured. Sudan’s North-South civil wars lasted roughly 40 years—almost their entire post-colonial history—and resulted in approximately two million deaths. Eritrean rebels fought for 30 years. While people in other secessionist regions have no doubt suffered immensely and have legitimate grievances, they have not put in the time or paid a price that puts them on par with Southern Sudan (again with the exception of Western Sahara). This history matters, because it demonstrates the intractability of the conflict, and suggests that partition may be a necessary option. The determination and sacrifice of secession movements elsewhere should not be casually questioned, but there should be a threshold at which secession movements are considered to be credible, and the support and commitment demonstrated by the movement should be key factors in meeting that threshold. Beyond Sudan, few if any movements in Africa can show that requisite level of support and commitment.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief was written by Jon Temin, a senior program officer in USIP's Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution, where he focuses on Sudan and leads the Institute's Sudan team. He travels to Sudan frequently and has significant experience in other regions of Africa.

Furthermore, for any secession movement to stand a chance of success it requires significant international support. One reason Southern Sudan may succeed in gaining internationally recognized independence is that a pillar of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended Sudan's second civil war is the South's right to self-determination, and the CPA was the product of vigorous international engagement, mediation and cajoling (by the U.S. and other key international actors and regional bodies). In some ways the international community owns the CPA as much as the Sudanese do, which ties the international community to the referendum and its result. But no other secession movements in Africa (with the possible exception of the Polisario in Western Sahara) have anything equivalent to the CPA that may compel influential members of the international community to recognize their right to self-determination. International recognition is crucial to successful secession—Somaliland's lack of recognition provides a case in point. Without that international backing, other African secession movements are unlikely to get very far.

What of the prospect that the secession of Southern Sudan could precipitate the breakup of some of Africa's other large, conflict-ridden states, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia (whose constitution says "every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession"⁸) or Nigeria? (Col. Gaddafi suggested in March that Nigeria *should* split into two). While those states have plenty of opposition movements and rebels, none of the major opposition forces are currently advocating for secession. Without a powerful champion pushing for secession, any precedent set elsewhere, such as in Sudan, is unlikely to gain much traction at home.

The combination of factors giving Southern Sudanese the option to secede is unlikely to be repeated elsewhere in Africa any time soon. If Southern Sudanese choose to secede, perhaps more concerning than follow-on secessions is the prospect that the *threat* of follow-on secessions—real or exaggerated—will be used by leaders in other states to clamp down on internal dissent in the name of unity. A wave of imitation secession movements across the continent is unlikely, or at least unlikely to get very far. For the same reasons that it's been 17 years since Eritrea's secession, it may be just as long until there is another prospect for internationally recognized secession in Africa. Just as warnings of a domino effect following Eritrea's creation were overstated, so are similar warnings concerning Southern Sudan.

Endnotes

1. Sam Kiley. "Eritrean Vote Will Fuel Breakaway Scramble in Africa." *The Times*, April 23, 1993.
2. Richard Dowden. "Eritrea Emerges as World's Newest Nation." *The Independent*, May 25, 1993.
3. "Sudan's Partition to be a 'Contagious Disease.'" AFP, October 10, 2010.
4. "Kenya Looking Forward to a 'Free South Sudan' – Envoy." *Sudan Tribune*, October 15, 2010.
5. "Algeria: South Sudan Secession Could Have Serious Impact on African Continent." *Kuwait News Agency*, October 25, 2010.
6. Philippe Perdix. "Sud-Sudan: Les Frontiers Africaines Sont-Elles Menacees?" *Jeune Afrique*, October 22, 2010.
7. Organization of African Unity, Resolutions Adopted by the First Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government Held in Cairo, UAR, dated July 17-21, 1964.
8. Article 39 of the 1994 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.



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