

## **Africans Pick Congo Republic Leader, Not Sudanese, for Union Post**

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KHARTOUM, [Sudan](#), Jan. 24 - African leaders bypassed one of the continent's most controversial presidents as the choice to head the African Union on Tuesday and opted instead for a leader who has managed to reinvent himself, Denis Sassou Nguesso of the [Congo Republic](#), a onetime coup leader now regarded as a stabilizing force in the region.

President Omar Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan had wanted the job as Africa's chief peacemaker and emissary, but his colleagues, who are holding a summit meeting in his capital, thought otherwise, troubled by the Sudanese government's involvement in the war in the western Darfur region of the country.

Mr. Bashir did not lose out completely, though, since his colleagues indicated that the job would be his in 2007. The offer came with the clear expectation that Mr. Bashir would work to end the Darfur crisis before then.

Mr. Sassou, who succeeds [Olusegun Obasanjo](#) of Nigeria as chairman of the 53-member bloc, is a smartly dressed former paratrooper who has long used his perch in the tiny Congo Republic, on the continent's Atlantic coast, to speak out on behalf of Africa. He is one of the longest-serving leaders in the African Union and previously filled the rotating chairmanship in the group's predecessor, the Organization of African States.

In some respects, Mr. Sassou is not so different from the man who failed to get the job. Both Mr. Sassou and Mr. Bashir took power in military coups, in 1979 and 1989, respectively. The two soldiers also preside over countries that have spent much of their postcolonial history torn by civil war.

But one major difference is that the Congo Republic has managed to quell its civil war, while Sudan has reached a peace deal in one big conflict, its 20-year-long north-south dispute, only to find itself enmeshed in another one, the crisis in Darfur.

Also, while Sudan is in the early stages of allowing political dissent, Mr. Sassou opened up his country to multiparty elections in 1992. They did not go as he planned, and he found himself voted out of office. But he resurfaced five years later, backed by Angolan troops, and grabbed back the presidency in a brief but bloody civil war.

He fared better in his second attempt at electoral politics, winning by a landslide in March 2002.

Human rights organizations praised African leaders for rebuffing Mr. Bashir's bid for the chairmanship and offered lukewarm praise for Mr. Sassou.

"Sassou's human rights record is nothing to celebrate, but there are not atrocities on the level of Sudan," said Reed Brody of Human Rights Watch.

Mr. Sassou's colleagues described him as serious, eloquent and committed to the betterment of Africa.

Jendayi Frazier, the American assistant secretary of state for African affairs, said Mr. Sassou was a leader the Bush administration could work with to help resolve the crisis in Darfur, indicating that the United States would continue to back the African Union's peacekeeping mission there.

Financing for that operation will dry up in March, and some African leaders have suggested that the United Nations should take over the peacekeeping duties. That will be only one of the issues Mr. Sassou will face.

"We shall do everything we can to ensure peace will come," he said. "It's a big challenge for us."