

In Sudan, Give War a Chance
By Gérard Prunier, The New York Times
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Less than a year after South Sudan declared its independence, it appears headed for war once again with its northern neighbor, Sudan. At the same time, marginalized northerners are rebelling against the government of Sudan's president, Omar Hassan al-Bashir. The international community has called for a cease-fire and peace talks, but the return of violence is not necessarily a bad thing. Soldiers killing one another in war would be far less devastating than thousands of women and children starving to death while waiting for a negotiated peace that will never come.

Mr. Bashir's government cannot be trusted. It has for years systematically betrayed its agreements — signing dozens of treaties and then violating them. Paradoxically, an all-out civil war in Sudan may be the best way to permanently oust Mr. Bashir and minimize casualties. If a low-intensity conflict rages on, it will lead to a humanitarian disaster.

South Sudan seceded from the rest of the country last year in what once seemed a radical solution. But the conflict has continued. This is because Sudan's wars have for too long been mistakenly seen as a result of tension between a Muslim north and a Christian south. According to this logic, separating them would bring peace.

But this logic was flawed. Sudan's recurring wars don't stem from religious conflict but from the Arab government's exploitation of various non-Arab groups on the country's periphery — including the southern Christians and predominantly Muslim groups like the Darfuris in the west, the Bejas in the east, the Nubians in the north and the Nuba in Kordofan. These peripheral regions have been exploited by Khartoum since the 19th century. But until recently, the South was the only region aware of this exploitation because it was neither Arab nor Islamic.

The rest of the country lived for more than 150 years under the illusion that it shared fundamental values with the Arab center. It was only when black Muslim soldiers were sent south to kill their black Christian compatriots in the name of Islamic purity that they began to realize that Islam did not give them any advantage in terms of education, health and economic status over the "heathens" they were ordered to kill.

The American-sponsored comprehensive peace agreement of 2005 was supposed to cure Sudan's endemic conflict, but it used the wrong medicine. The agreement was signed by only two sides: the Muslim north and the Christian south. That left fully one-third of the Sudanese people — the African Muslims — without a political leg to stand on. And it is that forgotten third that is now fighting the Sudanese government because, after years of serving as its house servants and foot soldiers, they have come to realize that they will never be anything but second-class citizens, despite their Islamic faith.

Although the Arab world has been shaken by a series of upheavals, Sudan has remained the odd man out. Islamists continue to rule Sudan after 23 years of failure. They promised to end the civil war but instead militarized the country, killed more than two million people, ruined the non-oil economy, gutted civil liberties and gagged the press and academia. After losing the war (and the north's oil resources), they realized they had no plan B. Their only recourse was to vilify African Muslim rebels as traitors, denounce southern Christians as instigators of the Muslim revolt and promise more repression.

Whenever foreign leaders demand greater respect for human rights or peace talks, Sudan always agrees, because agreeing makes the international community happy. But we forget too quickly. A year ago northern Sudanese forces invaded the disputed town of Abyei on the eve of South Sudan's independence; they later agreed to withdraw, but they never left.

The status quo is not working, regardless of what American and United Nations officials might believe. Mr. Bashir recently referred to the black leaders of South Sudan as "insects" and insisted that Sudan must "eliminate this insect completely." For those who remember Rwanda and the racist insults hurled by Mr. Bashir's janjaweed militias during their brutal attacks in Darfur, his vile words should be a wake-up call. Indeed, without some moral common ground, "negotiations" are merely a polite way of acquiescing to evil, especially when one's interlocutors are pathologically incapable of respecting their own word. And in the case of a murderer like Mr. Bashir, there is no moral common ground.

Sudan has now reached its point of no return. Many Arabs across northern Sudan have become fed up with the jingoistic frenzy now being deployed by their exhausted tyranny and are quietly waiting for a chance to join the revolt begun by non-Arab Muslims.

The rebels battling Mr. Bashir's government are waging a real battle for freedom, and their de facto alliance with southern Christians could finally bring Sudan's endless conflict to a close. War is a tragic affair, but the brave Sudanese men who have chosen it as a last resort deserve to be allowed to find their own way toward a Sudanese Spring, even if it is a violent one.

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