NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Sudan: reconciliation or repeating tragedy?

Thomas P. Melady | Oct. 12, 2010

A woman casts her ballot at a polling station in Malakal, Sudan, April 12. (CNS photo/Finbarr O'Reilly, Reuters)

Perspectives

The factors that constitute the current geopolitical situation in Sudan have all the potential for repeating the immediate past -- which was a bloodbath. Or since the world is aware of these factors, can the elements be brought together so that Sudan can become an example of reconciliation?

Either prospect would have a major impact on today?s world. Since the last bloodbath in the 1990s, a new element has entered the equation. Al-Qaeda terrorist interests recognize a vulnerable situation that could be exploited to promote a Muslim-Christian clash.

The Obama administration and the United Nations have been monitoring and guiding the discussion. There is a strong incentive to assist Sudan in finding a way. In the difficult period of guiding the transition from white apartheid rule in South Africa to majority governance, world leaders played a major role in accomplishing this change without violence. More worldwide assistance in the Sudan matter is needed. Reconciliation at this time may not be reasonable to expect, but civil engagement facilitating two states -- one predominately Muslim, the other Christian and local African religions -- might be. At a future date, reconciliation of the two communities might develop.

But today, the goal is to avoid a violent clash full of ethnic and religious alienation.

Sudan is the largest country in Africa. It is around one-fourth the size of the United States; in population it has approximately 41 million people. Its location in northeast Africa, south of Egypt and west of Ethiopia, placed it at the crossroads of ancient civilization. For centuries the area now known as Sudan was referred to Nubia. The long history of Sudan was heavily influenced by the Nile River, which more or less divided the country.

In the fourth through sixth century, Christianity had established itself as a predominant faith in the Sudan. However, once the Muslim Arabs conquered Egypt in the seventh century, Islam replaced Christianity as the leading force in northern Sudan.

In the 1500s a demographic transformation occurred in the south when the Funj people and other black Africans

became the predominant community. By the 19th century northern Sudan was overwhelmingly Muslim. In the south, the number of Christians was rapidly increasing. Relations between Christianity and the animist religions in the south were very good; even then the Muslim-Christian relations were problematic.

Sudan, like most of its neighbors in Africa, severed ties with the United Kingdom in 1956. Without the domination of an outside power, the political factions of the overwhelmingly Muslim north and the increasingly Christian south erupted in open conflict. The first civil war ended in 1972. The ethnic-religious differences combined with famine-related economic issues resulted in a resumption of civil war in 1983.

The second outbreak rapidly turned into a bloodbath. Over 2 million were killed, and over 4 million people were displaced.

International negotiations and pressure, with the United States playing a major role, brought an end to the 22-year struggle. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, officially ratified in January 2005, granted the southern peoples autonomy for six years.

These past few years have seen extensive discussions and visits by U.N., European and American negotiators, all focused on bridging the cultural-ethnic-religious gap between the north and south. There is little evidence of success, except that since 2005 there has been an absence of violence.

This has been a period of relative peace. Since 1956, when independence was declared, Sudan has been ruled by a series of unstable governments. The fragile relationship between the north and south has made Africa?s largest country a very unstable giant.

In 1998, the United States launched cruise missiles that destroyed a pharmaceutical manufacturing facility in Khartoum. The United States alleged that the Sudanese factory was a business front for the Islamic militant Osama bin Laden. Despite this background, the United States was able to overcome many obstacles that prevented a relationship of trust with at least a few of the leaders. The United States has made a major effort to move Sudan forward in terms of implementing the referendum agreements in the accord of 2005. In September of this year, President Obama discussed with Sudanese and U.N. leaders the next step for the future of this trouble area. He urged that the referendum for the independence of southern Sudan be carried out without violence.

The shadow over the immediate future is oil wealth. This resource is overwhelming located in the area that constitutes southern Sudan. Will the north accept this economic reality and allow the southern state to become independent?

While the energies of the United States are focusing on a calm transition, al-Qaeda terrorist groups are urging some of the northern Arab leaders to oppose independence for the south. The referendum makes it very clear: The south has the right to proceed and exercise the option of independence. The United States and the United Nations must remain strongly engaged in this process, or there could very well be another bloodbath. The implementation of a political solution between two sovereign states will avoid violence and could eventually lead to reconciliation. In the complex circumstances of Sudan this would indeed be the best solution possible. The future may very well be determined in the remaining weeks of this year.

[Thomas P. Melady, former U.S. ambassador to Burundi, Uganda and the Holy See, is senior diplomat in residence at the Washington-based Institute of World Politics.]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/26/2016 - 06:13*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/global/sudan-reconciliation-or-repeating-tragedy