

After historic vote, new challenges on horizon for Sudan

Christina S.N. Lewis | Feb. 4, 2011



A Christian man in Juba, Southern Sudan, holds up a Bible as he chants slogans during a parade in support of the referendum on independence Jan. 9. (CNS photo/Thomas Mukoya, Reuters)

Southern Sudan has voted to secede from the northern part of the country, an official tally of votes for the historic Jan. 9-15 vote is expected to reveal today.

Final results for the vote are due this afternoon. Christina S.N. Lewis was in the country during the vote as part of a reporting trip to Africa. She filed this report for *NCR* two weeks ago, when the results of the election were still unofficial.

Nairobi, KENYA -- Initial results show that the Southern Sudanese people voted overwhelmingly to split from the north. Officials have already begun making plans for the new country, which is likely to be named the Republic of South Sudan, according to officials.

With nearly 99 percent of ballots counted as of Jan. 25, results showed that 98.8 percent of voters backed secession, according to southern sudan2011.com, a Web site operated by the government office responsible for conducting the referendum.

Despite reports of some irregularities, international observers have widely pronounced the vote legitimate. The official result is expected the second week of February. Formal independence is slated for July 9.

South Sudan had been operating as a semi-autonomous state since 2005, following a U.S.-backed peace accord between the south and the north, ending one of Africa's longest-running civil wars. During a weeklong referendum that drew global attention, close to 4 million Southern Sudanese braved lengthy lines in order to cast their vote.

The Catholic church is perhaps the only South Sudan institution to survive the decades of war intact. The state draws Catholic missionaries from Kenya and elsewhere in Africa to serve in its rural parishes. "We can't fill all the parishes," said Fr. Francis Xavier Barongo, a 35-year-old Kenyan missionary priest with the Apostles of Jesus, who was on leave in Nairobi for a few days after a year in the country. "Sudan is a lot of work."

The church had thrown its weight behind a peaceful vote and continued to play a key role as the referendum continued. On Jan. 14, Southern Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, asked the nation to forgive those who had killed their loved ones. Archbishop Paulino Lukudu Loro of Juba even blessed a facsimile ballot box at the altar, according to Agence France-Presse.



The Southern Sudanese are dark-skinned and

largely Christian and animist, whereas the north is Muslim and Arabized. Historically, the people in the north looked down on the people in the south and had often enslaved them. Once the country received independence in the mid-20th century, the northern government in Khartoum largely ignored the south, leaving it starved of resources.

The secession, however, raises new challenges, such as citizenship and currency. The soon-to-be two countries must decide how to share oil revenues. The oil is located in the landlocked south, but the refineries are in the north. Meanwhile, the region of Abyei, which is claimed by both states, remains a volatile flash point.

There have been reports that since the referendum Southern Sudanese have been fleeing the north in droves, fearing retaliation. The Khartoum-based government has said that it would impose Islamic law throughout the north when secession takes place.

In North Sudan, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, which took place Jan. 25, drew not even a hundred people, said Khartoum Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Adwok Kur, who is based in the city of Kosti. In years past, the celebration would draw 1,000 worshippers. "It's an indication that people have left Kosti for the south," Adwok said.

Meanwhile, the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference has scheduled an administrative meeting for the second half of February in Khartoum. On the agenda: how and whether the conference can continue to work together as a whole.

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