

**“The South Sudan Referendum, Round #1:
North American Press Framing of the Separation Option
in Coverage of the 2010 Sudanese Election”***

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the
Annual Meeting of the
Canadian Political Science Association
Wilfrid Laurier University
May 16-18, 2011**

Introduction

While for many observers the results of the April 2010 elections in Sudan were closer than expected (incumbent President Omar al-Bashir won with 68 percent of the vote), the outcome was really never in doubt. However, in that the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the long-lived civil war in the South called for a referendum in January 2011 to determine the region's future status with respect to Sudan, the 2010 elections can be seen as critical to setting the stage for that referendum. What this paper examines specifically is the *framing of the independence option* for South Sudan and a possible international response to renewed violence in election coverage of the "newspapers of record" and major capital city newspapers in the United States and Canada -- *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto) and the *Ottawa Citizen* respectively.

It was acknowledged in the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), *The Responsibility to Protect*, that early identification of problems likely to lead to wide-spread civil violence was difficult, thus complicating the Commission's preferred strategy, that of *conflict prevention* (ICISS, 2001: 20-22). We do not dispute this, but submit that if ever a case for a "responsibly to prevent" was possible to anticipate, South Sudan has to rank among the leading contenders. This assessment is based on the two-phased civil war, fought for the most part in Southern Sudan, lasting some 40 years, in which an estimated two million people perished and an additional four million were displaced from their homes. We must also consider the Sudanese government's more recent heavy-handed response to the insurrection in Darfur. As early as 2002, prominent Sudanese diplomat and scholar, Francis Deng maintained that "self-determination for the South has become recognized as *a right that cannot be denied, wherever it leads*" (2002: 85, italics added). Following this, the questions addressed in this paper are: (1) in their coverage of the 2010 elections, did leading North American newspapers in fact "alert" American and Canadian populations to the possibility of renewed violence resulting from a vote favouring independence in the 2011 referendum, and, if they did, (2) how did they "frame" the international community's "responsibility to prevent" a potential humanitarian crisis in the making.

Background

Writing when the terms and conditions for ending the second civil war were being negotiated, Deng argued that "the crisis of nationhood currently afflicting the Sudan" could be traced to two factors:

the lack of cultural roots of the modern African state which was fashioned on the European model in virtual disregard for indigenous values and institutions... [and] ... that colonialism separated ethnic groups and brought others together in the process of state formation, creating diversities that were eventually rendered conflictual by gross inequities in the sharing of power, national resources, and development opportunities (2002: 61).

He went on to describe the conflict that actually started in Sudan a year prior to independence in 1956, as

essentially a conflict of identities between the Northern and Southern parts of the country. The North, roughly two-thirds of the country's territory and population, is Arabized and Islamic. The South, the remaining third, is more indigenously African in race, culture, and religion. However, Christianity, initially introduced by Western missionaries, has become widely accepted as one of the central features of Southern identity, and the modern counterpart to Islam in the North (Deng, 2002: 62).

Abdel Salam Sidahmed has explained some of the colonial and post-colonial history of Sudan which contributed to the split between North and South. While Sudan is the largest country in Africa (a quarter the size of the U.S.), its current boundaries did not take shape until the major European thrust into Africa toward the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. First, in the 19th century under Turkish-Egyptian rule (1821-1893), "the south was gradually, but violently, brought into the domains of Sudan through the devastating incursions of the slave trade, the plunder of the region's natural resources, and the distortion of its social fabric." Later, under a British-led "condominium" rule over Sudan with Egypt (1898-1956), the South was administratively separated from the North, formalized in 1930 in a *southern policy* which "administered the south as a separate entity and prohibited the settlement of northern traders, officials and educators in the region to discourage the transmission of Arab culture. The south was, however, opened to Christian missionaries, thus strengthening its non-Muslim religious orientation." In fact, the British intended "to annex southern Sudan to some of its other east African colonies," a policy not abandoned until 1947, less than ten years before independence (Sidahmed and Soderlund, 2008: 76). According to Deng, following independence "this dualistic administration was reversed into a unitary state in which the North dominated and began to implement a policy of Arabization and Islamization in the South" (2006: 156).

As mentioned, the first civil war started initially as a military mutiny in 1955, the year before independence was achieved. It later took on political dimensions due to "accumulated grievances held by the southerners toward the north and its political elite." According to Sidahmed,

Southerners could not see themselves as part of the Sudan's national politics. They were either poorly represented ... [having received only four minor posts out of 800 previously held by the British] ... or absent from all the negotiations and steps that led to the country's independence, a promise that their request for a federal system would be considered was dropped at the first constitutional debate after independence, and they were normally given only insignificant ministerial portfolios in successive cabinets (Sidahmed and Soderlund, 2008: 77).

As Deng assessed the situation, at the time of independence "the South clearly found itself ... the most marginalized and discriminated region in the country" (2006: 157).

Relations between North and South were further strained by the "Arabization and Islamization" policy pursued by General Ibrahim Abboud, who seized power two years following independence and ruled the country for six years. In 1963, the civil war was intensified by the formation of the Southern military group *Anya Nya* ("poisonous

snake”) coupled with “widening support for armed struggle among the southern public.” In 1971 the newly-formed Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) brokered the Addis Ababa peace agreement with the Khartoum government that recognized “the historical, cultural, and economic differences that existed between the north and south ... and the world community at large hailed the agreement that restored peace to Sudan after seventeen years of civil war” (Sidahmed and Soderlund, 2008: 78).

However, not all went well. After a ten-year period of uncertain peace, war broke out again, the result of a number of factors including dissatisfaction in the army on the part of former Anya-Nya officers, splits among regional political elites, tensions between the central government in Khartoum and the regional government in the South, failure to address the Abyei boundary question in a promised referendum,¹ and the discovery of oil in the region, which led to “disagreements and suspicion concerning revenue sharing and management of the industry” (Sidahmed and Soderlund, 2008: 79).

As with the first civil war, the second began with a military mutiny, which resulted in the emergence of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) under the leadership of Col. John Garang. While the earlier Anya-Nya group’s strategy had been secessionist, the political wing of the SPLA, the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) claimed to be “fighting to restructure Sudanese politics and society in a way that would tackle a wide range of historical inequities, not just the ‘southern problem’” (Sidahmed and Soderlund, 2008: 80).

Thus began a second civil war that was far more intense than the First, extending well beyond the borders of the South, including support for the South from Ethiopia and Libya, and with that intervention, a Cold War connection was added to the toxic mix. As described by Robert Matthews, “[w]ith the extension of the war to the north, first to the Nuba Mountains, then to the southern Blue Nile, the eastern region, and finally to Darfur, Sudan ha[d] become a humanitarian disaster of epic proportions” (2005: 1049). The second civil war did not end until the CPA, the terms of which had been under negotiation since 2002, was finalized in 2005.

The CPA and post-CPA developments leading up to the 2011 Referendum

As explained by Abdel Salam Sidahmed,

[t]he CPA comprised six individual agreements which cover power and wealth-sharing protocols; ... [the north and south were to share oil revenues on a 50/50 basis]... a protocol on security arrangements; a protocol on the resolution of the conflict in Southern Kordofan/Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile; and a protocol on the resolution of the conflict in the Abyei Area. The CPA provides for a six-year transitional period during which the South will have full autonomy, its own government and constitution, and a separate army, flag and budget. At the end of the transition period in January 2011, the South will exercise self-determination through a referendum to decide whether or not to secede from the Sudan. The people of Abyei Area will do the same (Sidahmed, 2010: 23).²

The key question is whether, the CPA that ended the second civil war, through its provision for a referendum in 2011 in the South regarding its future status with Sudan, in

fact set the stage for yet a third, and on this question knowledgeable academics are undecided.

Sidahmed reviews both positive and negative developments since 2005. Among the positives are that “[f]or the first time in the Sudan’s post-colonial history there has been an attempt to establish a political system that addresses both the nationwide interest in restoring democracy while accommodating long-standing grievances by marginalized ethno-regional communities, and offering regional autonomy for the south through a combination of wealth- and power-sharing agreements.” This, however, is balanced by the assessment that

notwithstanding these benchmark achievements, five years after the successful conclusion of the CPA, the promise of democratic transformation for the Sudan appears to be rapidly fading. What is clearly visible is the hegemony of the NCP [National Congress Party] in the North and the SPLM in the South. Meanwhile, the country still suffers from human rights violations, a lack of respect for the rule of law, a weak civil society, and media censorship (Sidahmed, 2010: 25).

As well, the conflict that broke out in Darfur in 2003 resulted in the “strengthening of the hardline or militarist tendencies within the [Khartoum] regime ... [leading to] ... government intransigence and an overall slowdown in the pace of negotiations, with the Sudan once again reverting to the status of a pariah state.” The above, combined with the indictment of President al-Bashir in 2009 by the International Criminal Court for “war crimes and crimes against humanity” related to government operations in Darfur, “have damaged the legitimacy of the NCP-led GNU [Government of National Unity], particularly in the eyes of the international community, and frustrated the process of democratic transition generated by the CPA” (Sidahmed, 2010: 26).

Deng, likewise presents an uncertain scenario with respect to the future of Sudan. On the one hand, he sees developments “playing out in a way that is challenging dualistic characterization of the conflict. This would seem to favor unity in diversity in the short run, with longer-term prospects for an equitable integration of the country.” On the other hand, he points out that “the likelihood, indeed the probability, of the North remaining committed to some version of the Arab-Islamic vision and the South opting for secession cannot be ruled out” (Deng, 2006: 160). Deng reminds us as well that the SPLM/A remains “primarily a military organization for armed struggle” (2006: 159), and that if renewed warfare does break out, he sees the potential “ripple effects extending far beyond the immediate regional context” (2006: 157).

Luke Patey, a researcher with the Danish Institute for International Studies, describes the 2011 referendum “as a watershed fraught with political uncertainty and possible armed conflict” (2010: 634) and he deals with the impact of oil, its location and exploration, its related infrastructure and most of all its revenues on the possible secession of the South; again we find a mixed assessment on what the referendum will bring.

First, there is an obvious benefit to both sides to seek out compromises that would avoid destroying an industry that has driven economic advancement in both the region and the country over the past decade, not to mention providing the lion’s share of government revenues in both North and South. Sudan is Africa’s third largest oil

producer (behind Nigeria and Angola) and over the period 2004 to 2008, the country registered a growth in GDP of almost 7.9 percent, which “stimulated a notable industrial and service sector expansion” ... [with oil, on average, accounting for] ... roughly 90 percent of total exports” over that period (Patey, 2010: 619-620).

However, in spite of providing a clear incentive to preserve the goose that laid the golden egg, Patey maintains that “[o]il remains central to sporadic bouts of armed conflict and fears of future instability” (2010: 617), and he outlines a series of oil-related problems.

The foremost among these is that the majority of Sudan’s oil reserves are located in the South or in border regions between North and South; in terms of production the South accounts for “over 80 percent of total crude production” (2010: 634). This gives Southern political elites an incentive to move toward independence and greater control of the resource, while Northern elites have motivation to “rearrange” borders to their advantage prior to a possible secession. Second there are problems of mistrust over revenue-sharing and mismanagement of the oil industry (evident as early as the 1980s, see above), that have not been dealt with, as well as the location of oil infrastructure such as refineries are adding to tensions. Third, the reality is that “[t]here is no need to make bleak forecasts of instability in Southern Sudan. Armed conflict is already rife in the region. The UN reported over 2,000 people had died and almost 400,000 were displaced in 2009 from violence between ethnic groups over water and other scarce resources” (Patey, 2010: 628). Additionally, “militarization of the North-South border during the CPA has led to several violent confrontations between the Sudan Armed Forces and SPLA in the oil-rich areas of Abyei and Malakal” (Patey, 2010: 627).

Patey concludes his article on the pessimistic note that even if rival elites do choose the route of compromise, this may not be enough to avert violence in the region. Citing misrule by the SPLM in the South, he claims that “the lack of a peace dividend and environmental degradation from oil continue to spawn armed resistance at the local level ... [and he predicts that]... [l]ow-intensity yet protracted conflict remains a likely condition for areas in and around Sudan’s oil fields” (2010: 636).

Long-time Sudan expert Douglas Johnson has assessed the implications of problems related to oil in the disputed Abyei region, a region that in a separate referendum called for in the CPA, was to determine its future status in 2011, with one of the options being “incorporate[ion] into the Southern Sudan” (2007: 8, see footnote 2).

The Abyei Area (co-inhabited by the Ngok Dinka and the Humr group of Misseriya Baggara Arabs in an increasingly conflictual relationship), is important both because it already has been a battle ground between “African and Arab” groups in the past (see footnote 1), and because within its ill-defined borders lie significant deposits of oil. Writing two years after the CPA came into effect in 2005, Johnson reported that “[t]here is a growing feeling ... that the Abyei Area could be the flashpoint that brings the country back to war” (2007: 2).

Significant is that early on the Sudanese government reneged on commitments made in the CPA to accept the decision of the Abyei Boundaries Commission (composed of foreign experts, one of whom was Dr. Johnson) regarding “the definition of the area” (2007: 1). Johnson explains that the North did not want

to lose control over Western Kordofan's large oil deposits, most of which are found within or around the areas claimed by the Ngok Dinka. Linked to this was a further determination not to concede any further territory to the South other than that which was included in Southern provinces as of Independence Day (1 January) 1956. On the SPLM's side, there was the importance of the Ngok Dinka as one of their own constituencies, and the conviction that the failure to resolve the Abyei dispute through the mechanism of the Addis Ababa Agreement was one grievance that led to the outbreak of war in 1983 (Johnson, 2007: 8; see footnote 1).

Patey reports that following the rejection of the Abyei Boundary Commission's report in 2005, the issue was submitted to the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, which removed some key oil fields from the Abyei Area. While both sides accepted the Court's decision, the SPLM maintained that "the question of whether or not the oil fields were in the North or South would have to be determined by the Technical Ad-Hoc Border Committee set up in the CPA." Patey tells us that while that committee has made significant progress (80% of the border between North and South appears to have been demarcated) "critical areas remain in dispute ... [and that] ... the location of key oil fields is a particular bone of contention with the 2011 referendum drawing near" (2010: 627-628). At the very end of 2010, Roméo Dallaire and Glen Pearson reported that while the UN and others, "in anticipation of major problems, have mapped out possible flashpoints for conflict, ... [they] ... *lack sufficient staffing, humanitarian access is still an issue, and a comprehensive plan to protect vulnerable populations has not been secured.*" (2010, Dec. 29: A17, italics added). They added, "[a]s if the situation was not tense enough, both Khartoum's armed forces and those of the ... [SPLM] ... in the south have massed along the volatile north-south border" (Dallaire and Pearson, 2010, Dec. 29: A17), intensifying concerns that a new war was imminent in the aftermath of the referendum vote that was less than two weeks away.

Methods

Due to limitations on paper length, we will not discuss in any detail the role of mass media in the process of public opinion formation. However, in terms of mobilizing support for international intervention, in spite of a wide-spread suspicion that the so-called "CNN effect" is a myth, we believe that sustained media coverage (*agenda-setting*) combined with conflict framing stressing that something both *must* and *can* be done (*advocacy framing*), are critical ingredients underlying a robust international response (see discussions in Soderlund et al., 2008: chapters 1 and 12; and Sidahmed et al., 2010: chapters 3 and 6).

For this study we focused our attention on major agenda-setting newspapers in Canada and the United States: *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto) and the *Ottawa Citizen* and *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* respectively. Sudanese elections were held in mid-April 2010 and the two-month period of press coverage surrounding these elections included in the study began on March 15th and ended on May 15th. Stories in *The New York Times* (N=15) were accessed online through the newspaper's archive, stories for *The Washington Post* (N=9) and *The Globe and Mail* (N=6) through Factiva.org, while those for the *Ottawa Citizen* (N=9) were accessed through ProQuest.

Findings

In view of the impact of increasingly stretched media resources,³ and a low priority for foreign (especially African) news,⁴ the volume of coverage of the 2010 elections was seen as reasonable, especially in that three of the four newspapers studied had their own reporters on the ground in Sudan to cover the elections for at least some period of time.

Election reporting began in *The Globe and Mail* on April 7, five days prior to the beginning of the vote, with an inside page story by *The Globe's* African Bureau Chief Geoffrey York. The story, datelined Khartoum, dealt chiefly with the conduct of the election campaign, noting that President Omar al-Bashir's hands are "in full control of the electoral levers ... [and that] ... the opposition has been squeezed off the political stage." The withdrawal and subsequent boycott of several opposition parties were reported.

Implications of the elections for the up-coming referendum were also significantly addressed in coverage. It was pointed out that their legitimacy was "rapidly dwindling ... [thus] ... casting doubts on whether Sudan can navigate peacefully through the tense months leading to a January referendum on secession by South Sudan." A report by the International Crisis Group reinforced the likely violence frame: "The NCP [National Congress Party] has refused to create the conditions for free and fair elections. ... It intends to continue to dominate Sudan, thus *leaving marginalized people to feel that they have no other option for challenging the status quo than continued armed resistance.*" The report concluded that "[a] victory by Mr. al-Bashir in a fundamentally flawed election will make even more likely that South Sudan will vote for independence in the referendum in January" (York, 2010, Apr. 7: A14, italics added).

In an April 10 inside page story filed from Juba, the capital of South Sudan, York speculated that "southern Sudan is likely to win its independence within a year" and expanded on the violence frame: a "show of force by southern Sudan's former guerrilla army was a strong reminder that violence has not vanished in the semi-autonomous south. ... There are fears that the three-day election that begins tomorrow could trigger more bloodshed in a region where at least 2,500 people died in fighting last year alone – more than the death toll in long-troubled Darfur." The election was also portrayed as "a big boost" in momentum for the Sudan People's Liberation Movement's [SPLM] goal of independence for the South. South Sudan President and leader of the SPLM, Salva Kiir noted that "'We are running the final lap in our journey to the referendum.' ... Within a few months of the referendum, if all goes smoothly, South Sudan could be the world's newest country" (York, 2010, Apr. 10: A17).

There was, however, a note of caution that all may not go smoothly: "The birth of the world's youngest nation could be a troubled one. ... *There are allegations that Khartoum is fueling the violence in the south by sending weapons to tribal groups and inciting the traditional cattle-raiding feuds in the region.* ... Another potential flashpoint is Khartoum's reluctance to set up a commission to prepare for the January referendum." It was noted further that because of past experiences with secession referenda, Canada had offered "'technical assistance' on 'referendum and postreferendum questions'" (York, 2010, Apr. 10: A17, italics added).

A third inside page story describing the first day of voting noted the absence of violence. However, it was the poverty of the south and the idea that the election was a

prelude to independence that were highlighted: “Southern Sudan is among the poorest and hungriest regions of the world, yet its people showed that they were ready to endure any discomfort to express their will at the ballot box – a will that seems to be leading inevitably to secession from Sudan in the near future” (York, 2010, Apr. 12: A11).

An inside page story two days later focused on the use of social media by political opponents and various techniques of intimidation engaged in by the regime. It was noted that while “Sudan’s political freedoms have improved a little since 2005 when the government signed a deal with former rebels from southern Sudan” a crackdown was expected after the elections. A dissident group leader, Nagi Musa claimed that “[t]he security forces still have full authority to beat and kill with impunity” (York, 2010, Apr. 14: A16).

The final *Globe and Mail* story by York was datelined Johannesburg and summarized the outcome of the elections and their likely implications. President al-Bashir had won easily, capturing 68 percent of the vote; however, in that SPLM leader Salva Kiir had garnered 93 percent of the vote in the South, the outcome was seen as “pushing the country further along its path to a seemingly inevitable breakup.” In York’s analysis, “[t]he elections show Sudan drifting into two solitudes, with Mr. al-Bashir dominant in the north and ... [Mr. Kiir] ... equally dominant in the south. Southern Sudan is now expected to vote for independence in a referendum in January, paving the way for the world’s newest country to be created next year.” Importantly, it was noted that Mr. al-Bashir had stated that the referendum “will take place on schedule” (as quoted in York, 2010, Apr. 27: A12). Beyond Canada’s offer of assistance in conducting the referendum vote, the issue of international action in the event of violence was not addressed.

The *Ottawa Citizen*, was the only one of the four papers studied not to have covered the elections with its own reporters, relying instead on its then parent’s Canwest corporate news wire service for five “news briefs,” augmented by inside page stories from Agence France-Presse and Bloomberg News reporters in Sudan. Although nine election stories appeared during the study period, only four addressed in any way the implications of the elections for the forthcoming referendum, with but one hinting at potential violence, and none touching on the role of the international community.

Election reporting began on April 2, with an inside page story datelined Khartoum, by Bloomberg News reporters Maram Mazen and Nicole Gaouette. The story drew attention to “concerns the election is rigged,” and reported that the majority of opposition candidates had decided to withdraw. It was mentioned that the 2005 peace agreement had ended “a 20-year civil war between the Muslim north and the south ... [where] ... Christianity and traditional religions predominate.” Reported as well was that the SPLM, the government in “the semi-autonomous region of Southern Sudan, ... was withdrawing its presidential candidate from the vote and boycotting the polls in the western region of Darfur.” There was no mention of the 2011 referendum, hence there was no assessment of the implications of the elections on that event (Mazen and Gaouette, 2010, Apr. 2: A7).

A day later another Khartoum-datelined story, this one by Agence France-Presse reporter Guillaume Lavalée, covered much the same ground, citing “allegations of fraud and a major opposition boycott.” The story also noted that the SPLM’s presidential candidate, Yasser Arman, had withdrawn from the race, but had indicated “the SPLM would still contest the regional and legislative elections ‘across Sudan, except for

Darfur” (Lavalley, 2010, Apr. 3, A11). A third election report was written by Agence France-Presse reporter Jailan Zayan, and up-dated developments in the campaign: the SPLM “was withdrawing not only from the presidential vote, but also from simultaneous parliamentary and state elections in all northern areas except disputed districts of Blue Nile and South Kordofan.” It was further reported that “[t]he SPLM is still campaigning to head the autonomous regional government that will rule the south up to the promised referendum next January” (Zayan, 2010, Apr. 10: A13).

The only *Citizen* story that addressed in any way the implications of the elections on the referendum was a “news brief” that appeared on April 12, portraying them as testing “the fragile unity of Africa’s biggest country. ... [The elections] ... *could also show whether Sudan can avoid more conflict and humanitarian crises as it heads toward a 2011 referendum on independence for the south*” (Canwest News Service, 2010, Apr. 12: A6, italics added).

The New York Times featured the most extensive reporting on the elections and their implications -- a total of 15 items appeared between March 23 and May 14, including six inside page stories, six “World News Briefs,” plus one each op-ed article, editorial and letter-to-the editor.

Reporting began on March 23 with a Reuters “World New Brief” highlighting President al-Bashir’s response to suggestions by international election monitors that the elections be delayed. The Sudanese leader’s reaction was less than diplomatic: ““We wanted them to see the free and fair elections, but if they interfere in our affairs, we will cut their fingers off, put them under our shoes and throw them out”” (Reuters, 2010, Mar. 23: A8).

On April 2, *New York Times* East Africa Bureau Chief, Jeffrey Gettleman reported from Nairobi that a number of opposition parties, including the SPLM, had withdrawn from the presidential election due to charges of “rigging,” but that the SPLM “would continue to participate in the parliamentary and local elections across the country, except for Darfur.” Implications of the election for the future of the country, where a civil war between the north and south had “killed more than 2 million,” were addressed as well:

the real risk to the country’s stability -- and the stability of the wider East Africa region -- is a planned referendum scheduled for early next year in which southern Sudanese will vote on whether to secede. If that referendum is tampered with, many analysts say, it could be a recipe for another war between the north and the south (Gettleman, 2010, Apr. 2: A6).⁵

Gettleman’s next story, datelined Khartoum, appeared on April 12, the day following the start of voting. Polarized views of President al-Bashir and his government were presented: in the north these were favourable -- (““Without him ... this country would turn into Somalia. He’s the only one who can hold it together”), while in the south the judgement was unfavourable -- (““Election? We don’t consider this an election. ... Around here ... people are still treated like slaves”). In Gettleman’s view all sides stood to loose as a result of the election: for the south, its leadership had given up “trying to position themselves as the spearhead of national resistance, connecting with rebels in the west, north and east,” ... [and were now] ... focussed solely on getting their independence.” As for the President, “his victory will be tainted,” with Gettleman

pointing out the irony that with the economy doing so well, “he may not have needed a heavy hand to win this election.” The International Crisis Group’s E. J. Hogendoorn addressed implications for the referendum, explaining that “[i]f the voting had been handled properly ... [the elections] ... could have helped ease the longstanding and dangerous tensions between Sudan’s center and its periphery. ... [that] ... [e]veryone recognizes ... [as] ... the root cause of conflict in Sudan” (Gettleman, 2010, Apr. 12: A4).

In an April 15 inside page story, Gettleman reviewed Sudan’s recent economic progress: “Sudan’s gross domestic product tripled since Mr. Bashir took power.” However, not all of Sudan benefited equally: “There are also large sections of the country, especially in southern Sudan and Darfur, that remain desperately poor and where well-worn images of stick-thin children are still true. Around 40 percent of Sudan’s 40 million people live below the poverty line” (Gettleman, 2010, Apr. 15, A4).

Gettleman’s summary article, datelined Nairobi, framed the elections as “essentially Step 1 of what could be a messy divorce ... [as the expected secession of the south] ... could bring turbulence to the largest country in Africa.” In terms of predicting a peaceful vs. a violent outcome, “the track record of Mr. Bashir ... raises troubling questions.” Just as troubling was an assessment that a post-referendum government in the south would likely be no more democratic than the one that ruled the north, as it too was accused of being “seemingly allergic to dissent.” Unfortunately, according to Project Enough’s John Prendergast, “[a]utocracy is the expected outcome on both sides of the border.” Oil was seen both as problematic and beneficial. On the problematic side, the President would be loath to give up the revenue stream driving Sudan’s economic engine; on the beneficial side was the reality that the two halves of the country “are reliant ... on each other, ... tied together by a 1,000 mile pipeline.” Gettleman also referred to the potential impact of a Sudanese split on Africa as a whole: secession “*could embolden separatist movements in other parts of Africa*” (Gettleman, 2010, Apr. 27: A12, italics added).

U.S. responses to a predicted southern secession were addressed in four items of content: an op-ed column, an inside page story, an editorial and a letter-to-the-editor. The op-ed article, datelined Juba, was written by *New York Times* correspondent, Nicholas Kristof and appeared on April 22. The piece was critical of President Obama’s lukewarm condemnation of Sudan’s elections, which Kristof described as “deeply flawed.” “Memo to Mr. Obama: When a man who has been charged with crimes against humanity tells the world that America is in his pocket, it’s time to review your policy.” The article focused on the implications of the elections, not only on the outcome of the up-coming referendum, but on the threat of renewed violence and an appropriate American policy to avert it. Kristof maintained that “the real game isn’t, in fact, Darfur or the elections but the maneuvering for a possible new civil war.” In that the South is “expected to vote overwhelming to form a separate state ... *the question becomes will the north allow South Sudan to separate?*” With the majority of Sudan’s oil located in the south, Kristof claimed that “it’s difficult to see President Bashir allowing oil fields to walk away.” He quoted the assessment of Sudanese human rights advocate, Mudawi Ibrahim Adam: “*If the result of the referendum is independence, there is going to be war.*” Kristof added that Adam believed that “America’s willingness to turn a blind eye to election-rigging ... increases the risk that Mr. Bashir will feel that he can get away with war.” Kristof’s own

assessment was that “the north hasn’t entirely decided what to do, and *that strong international pressure can reduce the risk of another savage war. If President Obama is ever going to find his voice on Sudan, it had better be soon*” (Kristof, 2010, Apr. 29: A29, italics added).

The only Washington-dated *New York Times* story appeared on April 28, was written by Mark Landler and focused on the views of General Scott Gration, the Obama administration’s Special Envoy to Sudan. Gration believed the south would opt for independence and if that happened, two issues would emerge: (1) would the Sudanese government “let it go without a fight,” and (2) “even if it does ... how will the new nation survive, with virtually no government institutions, few paved roads and desperate poverty?” He claimed that the U.S. needed to step up and “pour resources to help southern Sudan build its government and economy by July 2011, ... [adding] ... ‘We really haven’t had a good history birthing nations. We sure don’t want a failed state or a country at war.’” General Gration stated that although the U.S. could not “avoid having a leadership role ... [t]he problem is so big that it’s not an American problem ... [i]t’s a global problem.” Former Envoy to Sudan in the Bush administration, Andrew Natsios, addressed the issue of a response to violence in the firm, but imprecise language: “We need to set outer limits on what’s acceptable in terms of violence against civilians. ... *If the north attacks the south or attempts to take over the oil fields, we should have a response and it should not be rhetorical*” (Landler, 2010, Apr. 28: A10, italics added).

On May 3, *The New York Times* weighed in with an editorial skipped over the election, focusing instead on the referendum and describing it as leading to “another potential crisis.” While leadership in both the north and south had pledged “to respect the results” of the referendum, “there is so much oil involved that that they can’t be depended on to keep their word – without strong encouragement from the United States and other major players. ... [The international community] ... must make it clear – firmly and often – that renewed violence is not the answer.” As for specific policy guidance, “[w]hat is most needed is sustained attention, and pressure, in this critical period.” Steps in the right direction were noted: “Washington is sending more diplomats to southern Sudan. They have a lot of work to do – and not a lot of time – to help leaders improve their ability to govern and promote the rule of law. Otherwise, the desperately impoverished region runs the risk of becoming a failed state the day it is born” (*NYT*, 2010, May 3: A24, italics added). On May 6, a letter-to-the-editor from Refugees International’s Dan Glickman also focused attention on the potential of “south-south violence.” Citing reports of “voter intimidation and interference in opposition campaigns” on the part of the SPLM, Glickman suggested that

[t]he United States and its international partners *must engage in a robust contingency planning process to prepare for politically grave humanitarian consequences if a large-scale resumption of violence takes place, whether between the north and south or within the south itself* (Glickman, 2010, May 6, italics added).

The Washington Post covered the elections in nine items overall -- four brief news “digest” reports, two inside page news stories, two op-ed articles and one editorial.

As was the case with *the New York Times*, a full range of issues attracted journalistic attention.

Reporting began with an op-ed piece, filed from southern Sudan by columnist Michael Gerson. In this initial column the elections were framed as setting “the stage for South Sudan’s independence referendum... [in that their outcome] ... may determine if South Sudan becomes the world’s newest nation – or a stillborn state, plunged back into one of history’s bloodiest civil wars” (Gerson, 2010, Mar. 31: A17).

Interestingly, Gerson did not focus major attention on a possible renewal of the “north-south” civil war, but rather on problems internal to the south, claiming that “it is politics that could destroy South Sudan even before its birth.” Specifically, the SPLM was cited for a record of poor governance: “Most of South Sudan’s budget goes to the creation of government ghost jobs, allowing the SPLM to pressure public employees for support like a big city political machine.” As well, heavy-handed tactics employed during the campaign were seen “to have encouraged internal division instead of ending it ... [thus] ... allowing the skilled, brutal rulers of the north to play side against side, as they have done before” (Gerson, 2010, Mar. 31: A17).

Gerson described the United States “[a]s the main sponsor of the SPLM,” and as such it had an interest in promoting democratic legitimacy, which was seen as “the surest way to avoid a failed state and renewed conflict.” He ended the piece by pointing to the “terrible irony if South Sudan, a land that has survived by exceptional courage, should die by suicide” (Gerson, 2010, Mar. 31: A17). Gerson’s second op-ed piece a few days later, again focused on South Sudan’s internal problems, indicating that “[j]ust months from South Sudan’s likely vote for independence, its humanitarian challenges seem overwhelming.” He called for greater direct international aid, arguing that “technical assistance to build specific capabilities might be the only way to avoid the destructive failure of a new nation.” He also claimed not enough was being done to avoid catastrophe, citing the assessment of a U.S. State Department official that “[w]e are doing about 10 percent of what we need to do” (Gerson, 2010, Apr. 2: A19).

Following these two op-ed articles, *Washington Post* coverage shifted to the elections themselves, with conditions described by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice as “quite disturbing, ...[suggesting] ... a very brief delay.” This idea was rejected by the Sudanese government (Bases, 2010: Apr. 9: A9).

The post-election assessment of the elections by the White House, while critical, appears to be carefully worded to avoid across-the-board condemnation:

“Political rights were circumscribed throughout the electoral process, there were reports of intimidation and threats of violence in South Sudan, ongoing conflict in Darfur did not permit an environment conducive to acceptable elections, and inadequacies in technical preparations for the vote resulted in serious irregularities” (Reuters, 2010, Apr, 21: A8).

A post-election news “Digest” piece tied the outcome to the referendum, posing the question “whether the referendum will actually be held or whether Sudan will once again descend into civil war.” Pessimistically it was noted that “Bashir and his ruling party have a very poor record when it comes to allowing electoral competition, especially the kind that could reduce his grip on Sudan. And the south, home of most of the country’s

oil riches, plays no small role in Sudan's power structure" (Raghavan, 2010, Apr. 27: A6).

International responses to possible violence in Sudan were discussed in an editorial and an inside page story. A *Washington Post* editorial on May 2nd minced no words, claiming that the "election was widely acknowledged to be a fraud." Moreover the Obama administration was criticized for its timidity by holding the election "to a low standard." This was explained in terms of a deal: the US would "accept him as a legitimate president and set aside the war crimes indictment," and in exchange, Mr. Bashir "promised to 'complete the peace process in Darfur ... and also to 'go ahead ... on time, with a planned referendum in January.'" The editorial went on to cite the Sudanese President's past record of untrustworthiness and questioned whether "Mr. Bashir will allow the oil-rich south to go without a fight or that he will give Darfuris the autonomy they seek." In the meantime, "*the United States should refrain from prematurely recognizing Mr. Bashir's claim to legitimacy. And it should be ready to respond when he breaks his word*" (*Wash Post*, 2010, May 2: A16, italics added).

Two days prior to the end of our study period, an inside page story by Mary Beth Sheridan reported Special Envoy to Sudan Scott Gration's appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in which he defended the administration against charges that preparations for the referendum were "behind schedule." The retired General explained that "[w]e have to redouble our efforts. ... I think it's possible to get done everything we need to get done, but we can't waste a minute." Members of the Committee were skeptical and it was suggested that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice needed to play a more direct role. The urgency of the situation was underlined by National Intelligence Director Admiral Dennis Blair's assessment "*that of all the countries at risk of experiencing a widespread massacre in the next five years, 'a new mass killing or genocide is most likely to occur in southern Sudan'*" (Sheridan, 2010, May 13: A8, italics added).

Similarities in Canadian-American Reporting:

- The elections themselves were portrayed as flawed to the extent that they denied President al-Bashir the democratic legitimacy he both desired and needed.
- With the exception of *The Ottawa Citizen*, reporting in both countries featured reporters on the ground in Sudan and linked the elections to the referendum. Moreover, by both their conduct and outcome, the elections were seen to have further divided the south from the north, thus increasing the chances of a pro-independence vote in the 2011 referendum.

Differences in Canadian-American Reporting:

- U.S. reporting evidenced a greater use of opinion pieces: two editorials, three op-ed articles and one letter-to-the-editor.
- U.S. reporting focused to a greater extent on the probability that the referendum would lead to renewed violence.
- U.S. reporting also paid greater attention to how the U.S. and the international community should respond to the situation -- namely, the need for "diplomatic action," greater international aid, along with the assessment that not enough was

- being done. The specific question of a possible international military intervention in response to wide-spread violence was not broached.
- U.S. reporting brought up the issue of internal divisions in the south as potentially leading to violence, as well as the pessimistic appraisal that the outcome of an independent South Sudan would be two autocratic governments in Sudan instead of one.
 - U.S. reporting highlighted the south's poverty, lack of critical infrastructure and experience in governance, pointing to the possibility of a "failed state" at birth.
 - U.S. reporting also included discussion of two interesting "deals:" Jeffrey Gettleman's suggestion that the SPLM did not run Salva Kiir as a candidate to oppose Presidents al-Bashir nationally in return for an agreement to hold the referendum on schedule and the *Washington Post's* editorial suggesting a deal between the Obama administration and the Sudanese President to soft-pedal criticism of the elections and dismissal of the war crimes indictment in return for peace in Darfur and a guarantee that the referendum would be held.

Conclusion

While the question of what constitutes "adequate coverage" of an issue is fundamentally subjective, a total of 39 stories (24 in the U.S. and 15 in Canada) for elections in Africa, with three of four papers sending their own reporters to Sudan, is probably as much as one could have hoped for. Moreover, three of the four papers did devote a significant portion of their election coverage to their implications on the upcoming referendum and the potential for renewed violence, and U.S. coverage certainly conveyed that not enough was being done to deal with violence (both north-south and south-south), should it occur.

The January 2011 referendum was held successfully. While some violence occurred, on the whole the voting went extremely well, with 99 percent of the votes cast favouring independence for the Republic of South Sudan, which is projected to occur in early July 2011. However, there are continuing reports of violence in the South -- namely over 800 killed and 94,000 displaced thus far in 2011 due to the activities of rebel militias, the Lord's Resistance Army, and tribal fighting. Reuters reporter Jeremy Clarke speculated that "the building momentum of southern insecurity ... may sink the south after independence" (Clarke, 2011, Apr. 14: A10), a concern echoed by Zachary Ochieng writing in the *Sudan Tribune* (2011, Apr. 15). Moreover, issues with the north, including borders, (most notably the status of Abyei), the sharing of oil revenues, and questions dealing with citizenship remain unresolved, thus it is far too soon to lapse into complaisance and assume that all will go well (see Johnson, 2011, Apr. 4). The best we can hope for is that on all sides "cool heads" will continue to prevail, that international diplomatic efforts will be successful in encouraging compromise, and that a widely-predicted humanitarian crisis, can in fact be prevented.

Notes

*This paper represents the first installment of a larger research project that is monitoring the referendum and its outcome -- the independence of the Republic of South Sudan -- currently underway at the University of Windsor. In addition to the author of this paper, the project brings together the expertise of colleagues Abdel Salam Sidahmed and E.

Donald Briggs.

1. In his discussion of the role of the Abyei region in the post-CPA period, Douglas Johnson points out that the “failure to implement the referendum clause in Addis Ababa Agreement [that ended the First Civil War] was a significant factor in the growing political alienation of Ngok [Dinka] in the 1970s and early 1980s.” Moreover, during the Second Civil War, “the Abyei Area became the testing ground for a new government strategy combining regular army forces with Arab militias to clear the Ngok Dinka population out of the oil fields and their traditional homes. This strategy was later applied to the Nuba Mountains, refined in Western Upper Nile oil fields, and transferred to Darfur” (Johnson, 2007: 7).

2. Just prior to start of the January referendum in South Sudan, the Abyei referendum to decide whether the region would opt to join the South or remain a part of Sudan, was postponed until the actual status of Southern Sudan had determined and voting eligibility agreed upon. No new date for a referendum has been scheduled.

3. Over the past twenty or so years mass media have hit hard times financially and continue to suffer in terms of budget cuts and, as a consequence, reporters have been lost (Pew Center, 2010; see also Utley, 1997). Ginia Bellafante has pointed to the inevitable consequences: “Shrinking budgets at news outlets across the country means that many atrocities in far corners of the globe receive diminished attention” (2008: Apr. 8).

4. Beverley Hawk maintains that among the many sources of information available to western audiences on Africa, none is more important than mass media (1992: 3-5). However, international news in general occupies a low position in news selection priorities, with Africa seeming to be particularly poorly covered (see Stewart, 2002: 185; Sutcliffe et al., 2009: 137).

5. Jeffrey Gettleman speculated in that Salva Kiir did not run against President al-Bashir nationally, “a secret deal was cut between ... [the SPLM] ... and the ruling party in which the S.P.L.M. agreed to pave a clear path for Mr. Bashir to win the presidency without a runoff, in exchange for Mr. Bashir’s guaranteeing that he would stick to the referendum deal” (Gettleman, 2010, Apr. 2: A6).

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