Sudan clings to precarious peace

By Geoffrey P. Johnston | Friday, April 30, 2010

The UN estimates 2.5 million people have been displaced by ongoing civil war in Darfur. PHOTO: COURTESY GOSPELIFE

For the first time in 24 years, Sudan has held multi-party elections. The vote, which took place between April 11 and 15, fulfilled one of the key conditions of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) which ended Africa's longest running civil war.

However, if the peace accord is not fully implemented, hostilities may erupt again between the Islamic regime based in northern Sudan and rebels in the largely Christian south.

Since gaining independence from Great Britain in 1956, Sudan has been wracked by violence, including two civil wars. The bloodier of the two conflicts raged between 1983 and 2005, killing an estimated two million people.

The peace accord granted southern Sudan semi-autonomy for an interim period of six years. During this period, the CPA required Sudan's unelected government to hold democratic elections. In addition, the people of the south have the right to national self-determination; a referendum on independence must be held no later than 2011.

Threats to boycott elections

Earlier this year, Sudan's People Liberation Movement, the dominant political force in southern Sudan, together with a loose coalition of opposition parties, threatened to boycott the elections. They accused President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, who seized power in a 1989 coup, of electoral intimidation.

Bashir, who was indicted last year by the International Criminal Court for war crimes committed by government-backed forces in Sudan's restive Darfur region, responded with a threat of his own: Boycott the elections, and next January's referendum in southern Sudan will be cancelled.

The ultimatum forced the opposition to reconsider the boycott. Instead of sitting out the elections, they prepared for the upcoming referendum by running candidates in southern Sudan only.

Desire for independence

"Southern Sudanese are overwhelmingly polling for independence," says John Lewis, an international human rights expert with KAIROS, an ecumenical non-governmental organization.

"The reasons for this have largely to do with the decades of abuse they've suffered at the hands of the national government in Khartoum," he says.

According to Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul Yak, Primate of the Province of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan, the referendum will give the "marginalized" Africans of the south the chance to have a say in their future. "It's the right of each community to decide their destiny," he says.

As voter registration for the elections began in December 2009, southern Sudan leader Salva Kiir urged his people to support the independence option. Unless the south separates from the north, Kiir said, southerners would become second-class citizens in their own country.

"It looks as if Christians have become the second-class citizens [in Sudan], because more black Africans are Christian, and the race which is Arab is largely Muslim," Archbishop Daniel says of the Arab north's oppression of blacks in the south.

To his way of thinking, racism has become the central cause of the "marginalization of people of African origin" in Sudan. "The problem is no longer religion," says the Archbishop, who is himself of African origin.

He concedes that Christians were persecuted in the recent past. "During the war we could say that the Muslims are killing Christians, when they [Muslim fighters] announced the *jihad*. But the CPA was signed and killings of this nature vanished."

Ethnic war

Nevertheless, the spectre war still looms over Sudan. According to a published report, former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, who led a team of election monitors in Sudan, has said that any disruption of the CPA could plunge Africa's largest country back into civil war, igniting a wider regional war among neighbouring Christian and Muslim countries.

Canada is also concerned about the implementation of the CPA. When contacted by *ChristianWeek* during the run-up to the elections, Canadian Foreign Affairs minister Lawrence Cannon underscored Canada's support for the peace process.

In an e-mail, Cannon described meeting with Sudan's ambassador to Canada, Elsadig Almagly. "In this meeting I stressed the importance of free and fair elections and a transparent referendum process in 2011," he wrote.

In the aftermath of the election, Cannon publicly expressed concern about reports "of intimidation, limitations on political freedom and major problems in logistics and management of the elections."

More ominously, international observers allege that both the ruling National Congress Party in the north and the opposition parties in the south engaged in unfair electoral practices.

With most of the votes counted, Sudan's National Election Commission has declared President Bashir to be the winner of the presidential election. The election results also reinforced Salva Kiir's control of the south.

If in the coming months it appears that Sudan is not on the road to democracy, the country could be headed for big trouble.

"The elections are like a test run for the referendum," says John Lewis, "and if Sudanese don't perceive the process as fair, the results could be bloody."

Geoffrey P. Johnston is an independent journalist based in eastern Ontario.