

US Elections in 2012: The Implications for Sudan-South Sudan Relations

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The US is the biggest economy and the most powerful democratic country in the world. However, despite the huge size of its economy, economic growth has slowed down, particularly compared to China, the world's second biggest economy. While gross domestic product and industrial production in the US grew by 2.3% and 4.4% respectively this year, growth rates of the same indicators in China are 7.6% and 9.2% respectively. Also, while the rate of unemployment in the US is 8.3%, it is only 4.1% in China. Alarmingly the American current-account balance faces a deficit of \$483.2 billion, while China enjoys a current-account surplus of \$197.1 billion. If these economic indicators continue at the same trend, the economy of China can easily surpass that of the US by 2017. This grim economic climate constitutes the heart of the election campaign. People hope for an administration that can restore hope and put the US economy on the path of recovery.

The relations between South Sudan and the US have been special, particularly during the liberation struggle from 1983 to 2005. During this period, South Sudan was among the countries that received the highest US humanitarian assistance in Africa and funded agricultural rehabilitation and economic recovery programme in relatively stable areas. Thanks to advocacy work of the churches and friends in the US, the cause of the people of South Sudan received the highest attention in US foreign policy, particularly during the tenure of President George Bush junior. The issue of South Sudan was repeatedly mentioned during the State of the Union addressed by President Bush. Also during this period the number of Southerners who migrated to the US on the humanitarian grounds increased considerably, particularly children who lost their families. Now the US is one of the countries with the highest number of migrants from Southern Sudan.

The US also played a critical role in the conclusion of the CPA in 2005. At some point, President Bush became personally involved in the peace talks; he made phone calls to Dr. John Garang and President Bashir whenever there was a deadlock. In particular, the US came up with a proposal for resolving the conflict in the Abyei area when the peace talks were about to collapse over the issue. After the end of the civil war, South Sudan continued to top the list of countries receiving the US humanitarian and developmental assistance.

The leaders of South Sudan became regular visitors to the White House. I was one of the people who had the honour of accompanying President Salva Kiir in one of his meetings with President Bush to the Oval Office and I was impressed by the cordial and special relation between the two leaders. I remember the Texas hat given by Bush to Salva Kiir to symbolize that special relation. That hat became his special brand in Sudan. For the people of South Sudan, the name of President Bush symbolizes the solidarity shown by the US during the difficult times of their struggle.

On the other hand, relations between Washington and Khartoum deteriorated during the Bush administration. The US put Sudan on the list of countries sponsoring terrorism after the attempted assassination of Egyptian President Mubarak and Sudan becoming a base for operations of Al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations, as well as a base for investment by Osama bin Laden. Also with the eruption of the civil war in Darfur in 2003 and crimes against humanity committed by the regime in Khartoum, the US imposed economic sanctions on Sudan.

Despite this tough policy towards Sudan, Washington developed a parallel line of cooperation and exchange of intelligence with Khartoum in the name of fighting terrorism. There is evidence that the US started training, equipping and conducting bilateral operations with Sudan's intelligence since the early days of September 11 or even earlier, during the Clinton administration. This partnership seems to have been a tool for Washington to influence the regime in Khartoum. It may explain the lukewarm position of Washington towards the increasing atrocities in Darfur and the attack on Abyei in 2008.

After Bush came Barack Obama. I had the opportunity of attending the National Democratic Convention that confirmed Obama as their candidate to the office of the President in 2008. His spectacular acceptance speech was not only inspiring, it also projected him as a timely leader to save the US and restore hope in the world. When he became the first African-American to become President of the most powerful nation in the world, his victory was celebrated worldwide, particularly in Africa and South Sudan. As a descendent from the Luo ethnic community, the people of South Sudan believe Obama is a true South Sudanese as the origin of the Luo community has been proven to be in South Sudan.

During his first tenure, development assistance to South Sudan increased considerably. The Obama administration continued America's commitment to the full implementation of the CPA, particularly the conduct of the referendum that resulted in the birth of the new nation. However, the special relations that existed between Bush and Salva Kiir did not continue under Obama. This could partially be attributed to the new US foreign policy and partially to the conduct of the South in not keeping

the US informed about some of its strategic decisions.

The leadership of South Sudan failed to visit again the Oval Office, except for a meeting between the two presidents at the side of the last UN General Assembly meeting. In the light of its new foreign policy of constructive engagement and dialogue with the Islamic and Arab world, the Obama administration at times took a 'moral equivalence' approach on issues related to Sudan and South Sudan.

The intelligence partnership between Khartoum and Washington continued during the Obama administration and its implications became more evident. The US failed to defy Khartoum's expulsion of 13 key humanitarian agencies from Darfur in 2009. It also kept quiet about the delay of the conduct of the Abyei Referendum and the invasion of Abyei in 2011. Paradoxically some senior US officials even entertained and suggested the partitioning of Abyei area. The US Special Envoy, Mr. Lyman has made it very clear now that Washington is against partitioning of Abyei area. In addition, US has not taken a strong stand on Sudan's gross human rights violations in Southern Kordofan, its dishonouring of the political partnership agreement with SPLM-North and the theft of Southern oil by Khartoum. In the light of many considerations, the Obama administration seems to settle for the devil it knows and becomes cautious about any change that may bring extremists to power in Khartoum. Despite this intelligence partnership, the regime in Khartoum is becoming more repressive while strengthening its relations with terrorist and extremist organisations.

I was honoured again to attend the National Democratic Convention earlier this month and witness the nomination of President Obama for the second term. The challenge facing President Obama in the 2012 elections is how he lived up to his promises of restoring hope to those without jobs, saving the planet from global warming and closing the prison in Guantanamo. His Republican rival argues that 3 million more Americans are out of work than four years ago and that national debt has risen by \$5 trillion. He also argues that Obama's global warming efforts have evaporated, America's standing in the Islamic world is not higher than it was under President Bush and the prison in Guantanamo remains open.

On the other hand, listening to speeches, personal accounts and experiences during the democratic convention, particularly the enlightening speech of Bill Clinton, the democrats defended the performance of President Obama and argued convincingly why he should be given another four years. The real success of Obama is less about what he achieved but more about what he averted. It is a common fact that he inherited an ailing economy with a collapsing banking system, two car manufacturers close to bankruptcy and a declining employment and housing market. Most economists agree that Obama has averted economic recession and put the US economy on the path of early recovery. Also Obama is credited for invigorating US foreign policy and containing terrorism by killing Osama bin Laden.

The issue of Sudan and South Sudan has also featured in the current election campaigns. The Republicans accuse the Obama administration of not doing enough to support the new state of South Sudan and put pressure on Khartoum. The Democrats, on the other hand, boast they contributed to the birth of the new nation based on the free will of its people. It was highly appreciated that Obama mentioned South Sudan in his acceptance speech during the convention in Charlotte. Equally, the timely visit of US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to Juba showed America's commitment to its special relations with the South.

While the special relation that the South enjoys with US will always remain non-partisan, the relations between Khartoum and Washington are likely to come under serious scrutiny during the campaign. If Obama is re-elected, his administration may revisit its intelligence partnership with Sudan and review its policy of considering the regime in Khartoum as the best option for Sudan. The new Obama administration may also engage with other opposition forces, particularly the SPLM-North. If the Republicans win the elections, relations between Juba and Washington may improve to the same level as existed under the Bush administration. The Republicans will most likely take a tougher position on regime change in Khartoum and support other democratic forces to lead a peaceful democratic transition.

The best option for Khartoum is to take the current talks in Addis Ababa seriously and reach an amicable solution on all the pending issues with South Sudan and the SPLM-North. This will provide Khartoum a golden opportunity not only for reviving its special relations with the South but also in nurturing good relations with Washington.

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