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Administrative Referendum: A Wakeup Call for the Ethno-Political Conflict in Darfur

The protracted conflict in Sudan is an evergreen subject; much of the literature focuses on the history, causes of the conflict and the current atrocities in Darfur. However, there is a lack of knowledge surrounding the issues of division and fragmentation. The Government of Sudan (GoS) implements 'divide and rule', 'divide and destroy' with 'divide and confuse' monolithically as a policy, enabling them to maintain power throughout Sudan. The 2011 referendum of South Sudan led to the division of Sudan into two independent countries--Sudan and South Sudan. While peace remains out of reach, the suffering of innocent civilians continues to be widespread. A key question is whether Darfur should reunite as one province or remain five separate states? The Administrative Referendum in Darfur would be a cause for deadly Ethno-political conflict in Darfur.

The GoS has set a date in April, 2016, to conduct an Administrative Referendum in Darfur, in accordance with Article 10 of the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD). The peace agreement in itself has been characterized as having no integrity, no accountability, no transparency, no professionalism and no objectivity. Moreover, the legitimacy of the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM), the group that signed the document, is questionable in the eyes of the majority of Darfur populations. The Doha agreement failed to bring peace or stability to Darfur. Instead, it increased the level of insecurity and created numerous divisions among the rebel groups. Meanwhile, the social fabric and historical relationships of ethnic groups within Darfur are being actively destroyed. The GoS fosters a dialectic demand between its supporters, opposition groups and ordinary Sudanese. This is how the GoS has ruled for the past 26 years.

A referendum is a legal mechanism for voters to repeal or accept a law, after it has been passed by a popular vote by the public. It must be a voluntary process and usually takes place during peaceful circumstance--not while in the midst of a violent conflict. The current volatile circumstances are not amenable to a referendum vote. Therefore, it would be better to wait until there is positive peace in Darfur. Moreover, the majority of the indigenous people who have the right to vote are currently living in refugee camps, IDPs camps and war zones—making it difficult or impossible to reach them. Furthermore, it has been alleged that the GoS has promised to give militia the land--which is leading to demographic change.

Historically, Darfur was an independent Kingdom for several hundred years until the British annexed it to the rest of Sudan in 1916. The British ruled Darfur by a condominium government with Egypt for 40 years until the independence of Sudan in 1956. From 1956 until 1994, Darfur was a one Province "state". By 1994, the current Sudanese government had already been in power for 4 years. They divided the region into three states, before further dividing Darfur into five ethnic or ethno-political states--

with 43 tribal districts by presidential decree. The divisiveness of ethno-political states is considered one of the leading causes for escalating the current conflict. Thereafter, Darfur has experienced a rise in the use of tribal mobilization for political gain. Eventually, the groups involved find that the situation has brought them into conflict which becomes increasingly difficult to resolve.

What needs to be done to prevent further conflicts?

1. Encourage the GoS to implement all 485 items of the agreement and postpone the referendum until the indigenous people of Darfur are able to vote in peaceful circumstances.
2. Urge the Qatar Government to value human dignity over politics by spending their resources on creating peace rather than on escalating the conflict.
3. Lessons need to be learned from the referendum of South Sudan and its consequences.
4. Support the World Peace & Reconciliation (WP&R) Peace Education Project, which aims at creating harmonious co-existence, sustainable peace and reconciliation between all Darfur tribes—not just “African Darfur” or “Arab Darfur”, but peace in all of Darfur.

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