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Sudan's Election Paradox

Activist Brief

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In February 2010, Sudan is scheduled to hold its first democratic elections in 24 years. The elections are a central element of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, or CPA, which ended a deadly 24 year civil war between the North and South. It was hoped that credible elections would force Sudan's ruthless ruling party, the National Congress Party, or NCP to make a choice: change its behavior and compete at the ballot box or maintain the status quo and be voted from power. However, elections face significant challenges—including the continuing war in Darfur and increasing violence in the South—and are unlikely to serve as the main vehicle for radically improving governance and achieving lasting stability in Sudan.

The core problems that have hindered elections preparations are political. The premise and promise of elections—democratic transformation, consolidating the peace, and making unity attractive for all Sudanese—have been marred by the NCP's four-year pattern of obstructionism, which has stalled progress on CPA implementation and sapped good will between the parties.

The international community needs to lower its expectations for Sudan's election and develop a multilateral strategy to press the Government of National Unity—the ruling NCP in particular—to enact meaningful reforms regardless of who wins in 2010. The election can help revitalize CPA implementation and act as useful preparation for southern Sudan's self-determination referendum in 2011, but is not a silver bullet that will produce genuine democracy in Sudan.

The United States has already pledged \$95 million to support the election. But it and other donors must be wary about stamping a seal of approval on a process that could embolden President Bashir as he faces war crimes charges and continues to practice divide and rule tactics in Darfur and the South. The goal of international support should be an overarching peace for all of Sudan accompanied by a peaceful vote that helps create creating momentum and builds confidence for implementing the remaining major CPA provisions, particularly how to hold a credible self-determination referendum in the South.

The three main priorities for the international community must be:

Building capacity

- **Ensure that the electoral commission has an operational structure in place as soon as possible:** While it now has a framework and funding, the electoral commission still lacks the necessary field infrastructure and capacity—including functional offices, trained staff, and physical supplies—necessary to adequately prepare and conduct elections during the next dry season.

- **Educate voters:** Donors should support basic voter education programs so that Sudanese can participate meaningfully in the election, and have a greater understanding of their fundamental rights.

Mitigating violence

- **Bolster the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Southern Sudan, or UNMIS:** The safety of the elections must take priority. UNMIS should be bolstered to prevent and resolve emerging conflicts that will arise or be stoked in the context of the electoral process.
- **Postpone elections in Darfur:** Holding elections in Darfur without an inclusive political settlement will not contribute to peace in the region and could make things worse. The priority for Darfur right now must be the negotiation of a peace agreement that meets the core demands of Darfuris for representative wealth and power sharing and allows displaced persons to return home voluntarily and safely. Elections should only be held once that fundamental goal has been achieved.
- **Support conflict prevention and management programs:** Recent clashes demonstrate the potential for destabilizing bloodshed and the need to expand support for local-level conflict resolution and peace-building activities to prevent violence during the elections.

Focusing on the big picture

- **Press for comprehensive governance reform:** The process of moving forward with the legal framework for elections should be used as an opportunity to revise existing national laws that have too long made both fair elections and more accountable government extraordinarily difficult.
- **Initiate a diplomatic push for progress on the remaining major CPA challenges and end the war in Darfur:** Support for elections must be part of a sustained international strategy of incentives, disincentives, and leverage that will help prevent Sudan from relapsing into a third North-South war, allow the South to hold a credible self-determination referendum in 2011, and help achieve a political settlement to end the war in Darfur and allow refugees and internally displaced persons to return home.

Activists should take action

Call your member of Congress through the Capitol switchboard at (202) 225-3121. Urge them to hold hearings on Sudan and continue to make this issue a high priority for Congress.

[Sign the open letter](#) to President Obama encouraging his administration to address the immediate humanitarian crisis in Darfur and to achieve long term peace through a political solution for all of Sudan.