

Transcript

My role was the Director of the United Nations Integrated Referendum and Electoral Division (UNIRED, in short), a role that I played from July 2010 to March 2011. My responsibility was to support the country as a whole, but more specifically, to support the South Sudan Referendum Commission, which was based in Khartoum, and its counterpart in South Sudan, which was called South Sudan Referendum Bureau.

My role was to give them advice, to support them in every undertaking towards the holding of the referendum. I was working for an institution called the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, EISA, based in South Africa. I was invited to apply like everyone else for the position in Sudan. So, I applied and I had to ask for a sabbatical leave so that I could be available for the United Nations.

That referendum faced a lot of challenges. Among them, you can look at the level of literacy in the country. Very few people had a good level of literacy. As a result, we had to choose a very manual system as opposed to a sophisticated computer-based kind of system. And that was a challenge. So, we had to do the work manually and then try to put it in an electronic format. And that was a challenge.

The other challenge was the law itself. The law was very vague. It was badly written. As a result, it was difficult to tell whose Sudanese, who's South Sudanese, and who was not South Sudanese, because only South Sudanese could vote. And to qualify somebody as a South Sudanese, it was not easy, because it was not only geographic, because the law says something like all the people who were in South Sudan at independence in 1956 were South Sudanese. But now you must bring proof, people have relocated, we had people who were still in South Sudan, others were in the north, especially in Khartoum. Another group of people were in Darfur. And also, we mentioned the fact that the law provided that even outside of the country, where there are large groups of South Sudanese, they should vote. So, we had also to do some work in those eight countries, namely Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, for Africa, and outside of the continent, it was Australia, the UK, Canada, and the USA. So, you need to coordinate the work all over those places, and that was not easy.

Logistically, it was a big challenge because the roads were in bad shape. Telecommunication was a problem. Even [finding] the office for the UN and the referendum commission to be based was very difficult. The UN had even to build infrastructure, especially in the south, and give to the government so that they [could] operate in the different states of the south. So that was also a challenge.

One other challenge that we faced was by choosing the referendum to take place in January, that coincided with the winter in the north, in England, yet the voting material like ballot paper had to come from London. So, the referendum took place from the 9th to the 16th of January 2011. So that coincided with winter in the north. So, the plane could not take off. Around the referendum date, [there] was a big, big, big, it was big snow. So, we had to really pray that a pilot [would agree] to fly and bring the ballot papers. Thank God there was one brave pilot who was able to do it and come and bring it to us.

So you see, it was logistics, it was the level of education, there was the lack of democratic culture in the country, the fear of those who are in the north, the expectations of those who are in the south, logistics, and all of that made it very difficult.

I also spoke about the legal framework, which was not clear.

First of all, you need to always remind yourself that this is not my process, this is not a united process, this is for the Sudanese to decide among themselves. We must recall that the referendum didn't take place in a vacuum. It was based on a global and inclusive accord between the South Sudanese political leadership and the north—I mean, the government of Sudan as a whole. So, there was an arrangement where they said, within six years, we'll organize a referendum to decide if we remain together or if the south goes against it alone. So, our role was to be that resource person, resource institution, to support them towards that goal that they had assigned themselves.

There were many things which were... which are worth remembering. All the interactions we had, you could see that this is a country going through a very, very sensitive period whereby they had, as I said, in the north, they fear separation because remember, before the referendum, Sudan was the biggest country in Africa. So, in the north, they knew that if there was a split, they would become a much smaller country. And even the resources were mostly based in the south. So that was a problem, even if the pipeline used to go through the north. But still, the origin of the oil was mostly in the south. So that created a lot of tension. So, we had to be very careful when dealing with people.

In the south, they were also very much keen for going it alone, as they wanted separation, self-determination from the government of Sudan. So, to the extent that as the person in charge of supporting them, vis-a-vis the referendum, I had to warn them that the enthusiasm toward separation appears to be very high. So I warned them that if the practice that they seem to have resorted to during the 2005 elections, both in the north and in the south, where the impression was, it was dominated by these many political groups, and apparently it was not always clean and so on. I told them, if you do it for the referendum, you may end up having figures which are of participation, which are higher than the actual population which is supposed to vote. So be careful. And I told that to the vice president of South Sudan, Riek

Machar. I told him, "Be careful with your people. They must behave. And he was also worried about what he said, but can you help us with that? I said, "No, it's you. We must ask them to show a lot of integrity. Otherwise, you'll start the new state should there be separation. You'll start the new state with the reputation of having resorted to fraud, and that won't be good. So, every time we had to support them, be aware of their expectations and their fears and so on. But ultimately, it was a quite good process.

It was a big, big event. You remember, as I told you, in the north, they were afraid. Fears that we are losing a big portion of our country and probably the richest. In the south, they were saying, look, all these resources, the oil that we are giving to this nation, is not benefiting us. Because indeed, if you look at the infrastructure of the countries, they were skewed toward the North. The south was completely deprived. Schools, roads, housing, it was very, very difficult. So, there were a lot of expectations in the south and a lot of fear in the north. And that's why I'm saying a self-determination referendum is even more sensitive than an election, because in an election you choose people. Here you are choosing to separate from the people you have been living with for a long time.

First of all, if you are professional, you'll have to be neutral. You may have your own interests, you may have your own preferences, but you must always exercise that distance between you and the people who must decide about their fate, because this was their fate. So, of course, for me as a Congolese, I must say there was a fact that could have affected my impartiality, because I didn't like this concept of "self-determination referendum," knowing that in eastern part, in the eastern part of our country, there are some regional powers trying to take over to control us. I was saying to myself, but they may also initiate this kind of referendum, and we'll lose part of our country. So, but ultimately, I say, this is not the situation of Congo. In Congo, it's an aggression. It was not a civil war. Sudan had a civil war among Sudanese. With us, it's Rwanda, it's Uganda, crossing to our country to try to control the resources, the land, and if possible, to even lead to some degree of balkanization and so on. So, I had to keep that distance and say, I'm here for the Sudanese. I'll help them, but it must be done in an inclusive, transparent, and fair manner.

In the election referendum field, there are some principles. You know, when you organize such processes, you must make sure that you consult. You must know what people want. What they can do, what they can't do, what is sensitive in the country. You must consult. Because remember one thing, we are not the Sudanese. We were not the Sudanese. We were there to support them without taking part or saying that I prefer this group; I prefer this outcome. So, a lot of consultation to reassure people and also a lot of education, sensitization, public outreach, because remember, Sudan doesn't have a long tradition of democracy. Some people may not, could refuse that you exercise your democratic right. So we had not only to provide logistics, not only through the UN Basket Fund provide funding, to provide support

in the field of operations, public outreach, we had also to get people to understand why there is a referendum, how to vote during the referendum, what were their rights, and what were the rights of the other people around them. So, it's a matter of bringing them up to speed so that people can appreciate, because if you don't do all of that, they could kill each other and so on. So, it was a complex process.

I need to also mention that this referendum, according to the law, had to take place everywhere there was a big concentration of South Sudanese. But there were no, and that's one of the challenges, there were no statistics, no publication, on the number and the distribution of Sudanese in detail. So, people had to guess that, of course, South Sudan will have a lot of South Sudanese. There were many also in Khartoum, and there were others, even in Darfur. And also, the referendum law provided also that Sudanese living abroad in some of the countries could vote, and there were eight countries. It was Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, that's for Africa. And outside of Africa, South Sudanese living in Australia, UK, Canada, and the USA had to vote also. So just imagine trying to get to know, even in London, where exactly they are, so that you can place the polling stations. And in South Sudan, in Darfur, and remember also there was insecurity in Darfur. There were tensions in the country. So that's... these are the things to take into account when organizing this referendum.

You know, when you are in the field of elections, in the field of referendum, you need to realize that you are not reinventing the wheel. There are people who have done that before. There'll be people who will do it after you. So, we need to be able to share experiences. What I've learned in Sudan today can help me in Mali, it can help me in another country, and vice versa. So, we need to document and we need to start drawing lessons, developing good practices so that people who are working in the same field as us can learn from our experience and hopefully improve on our experience.

But ultimately, with the effort of everyone... remember I had a large group of professionals who came from all over the world. I had about 350 staff, many coming from UNMIS, the United Nations Mission in Sudan, and others coming from UNDP. All of them were part of my team because it was an integrated team. So, and with over 100 nationalities, we had a very complex process, but thank God it was successful and we were satisfied to notice that because we're consulting, because we got everyone involved, ultimately, when we organized the referendum and the result, no, when we helped organize the referendum and the result came out, among the very first group to recognize the result, it was the government of Sudan. They were the first to say this was credible. And I think for us, there was no other better proof that we succeeded than that. The international community and civil society group came afterward. But the government of Sudan, which had a lot to lose, was the first to recognize the credibility of the process that we supported.