

091208 South Sudan leaders arrested

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Police in Khartoum arrested three senior members of south Sudan's main political party on Monday in the latest sign of worsening relations between the ruling regime and former rebels from the south.

Fears of a renewed [conflict](#) have surged in recent months as tempers frayed over the faltering implementation of a 2005 peace deal. This landmark agreement ended the latest phase of a civil war between north and south which began in the 1950s.

Pagan Amum, the secretary general of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, a former rebel group that now rules the semi-autonomous south, was arrested during a protest in Khartoum, along with his deputy and an SPLM minister.

They were released later in the day and received a rapturous welcome. The men had been leading a banned pro-democracy demonstration outside parliament.

The civil war between the Arab-led north and rebels from south Sudan was one of Africa's longest and bloodiest conflicts, claiming perhaps 2m lives between 1983 and 2005.

If this conflict restarts, it could trigger a new [humanitarian crisis](#) and threaten Sudan's oil industry, whose resources are mainly in the south.

Tensions between the National Congress Party of President Omar al-Bashir and the SPLM have been rising due to the approach of two crucial events mapped out in the 2005 peace deal.

One is a national election that was originally scheduled for this year but has been pushed back to 2010. The other is a referendum on independence for south Sudan, due in January 2011. If it goes ahead, this poll is likely to result in a majority vote for secession.

But diplomats and analysts say there are doubts about whether Mr Bashir's regime will allow either to happen in a free and fair way. Khartoum is concerned about its access to oil wealth and has limited tolerance for dissent.

The SPLM and northern opposition parties had called Monday's rally to demand democratic reforms ahead of the election. It was a rare public challenge to Mr Bashir and the Sudanese authorities announced on Sunday that the demonstration was banned.

Police beat protesters and onlookers outside parliament with batons as Mr Amum, was driven away with other SPLM officials, according to Reuters.

Salva Kiir, the SPLM leader and the president of south Sudan, said in a statement that the arrests were "provocative and unjustified" and denounced the National Congress Party's "old mentality of doing business contrary to the letter and spirit of the [peace deal]".

Louise Roland-Gosselin, the director of Waging Peace, a human rights group, said: "This latest crackdown also reveals the dangers involved in showing dissent in Sudan, even when the Khartoum government is eager to demonstrate its democratic credentials by holding an election. It is clear to all those working in and around Sudan that there is a real possibility that relations between the NCP and the SPLM could completely break down."

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