



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

January 22, 2014

Understanding the Emergence of South Sudan's Current Violence *Political, Social, and Institutional Explanations*

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Introduction

On December 15th, 2013, gunfire erupted in the South Sudanese city of Juba. At the scene, several soldiers were instantly killed and numerous others injured. The next few hours were punctuated by spread of violence in the city, with authorities concluding the event as being an attempted coup. The battle eventually took an ethnic dimension. Targeted killing ensued between the Nuer and the Dinka in Juba and elsewhere in the country. However, members of other ethnic communities lost their lives, either through crossfire or some degree of targeting, much of which hasn't been sensitized in the media.

Dr. Riek Machar—having made it out of Juba safely—announced leading the new rebellion against what he calls an undemocratic government led by President Salva Kiir Mayardit, but has denied the orchestration of a coup. Reports show that Dr. Riek has subsequently mobilized thousands of youth mostly from his ethnic Nuer, to fight the government. There are some suspicions that this kind of robust mobilization might have occurred prior to the incident in Juba, an indication of a preplanned coup. While there are evidently political, power, and institutional dimensions to this, instead, it is the ethnicization of the conflict that has been highly popularized. Essentially, the events that preceded the present crisis appear political, and do not necessarily justify resorting to violence.

This review attempts to analyze political, social, and institutional explanations of the present South Sudanese unrest. The final segment of the analysis presents remedial suggestions.

Political Explanation

In a host of reports published by the Sudd Institute, the influence of poor political indicators in the nation's future is fittingly emphasized. One of the leading political expositions worthy of ascertaining here is the government's ineffective fight against corruption and mismanagement of communal resources. Several months prior to this violence, Dr. Riek, despite being a second powerful administrator in the country for nearly a decade before he was booted out, accused President Kiir of failing to effectively fight corruption. Others, such as the then Secretary General of the SPLM, Pagan Amum, joined in, accusing the President of similar failures. In turn, President Kiir's camp has accused Dr. Riek and associates with indiscipline, sabotage, and conflict incitement.

Although the Kiir's administration has made numerous references to fighting corruption, its efforts are widely considered unsatisfactory, confirming his colleagues' concerns and the prevailing public discontent with the government's failure to curb or eliminate this ailment in the country. This appears as government's unwillingness to effectively fight this problem as exemplified by an extreme lack of fair trials and prosecution of those involved in unscrupulous activities, the recent accusation that was essentially watered down occurring in the Office of the President. Worse still, hundreds if not thousands, of corruption related cases, sit with the national Ministry of Justice—all deliberately made inaccessible to the public, a blatant sign of lack of political will on the part of the government. More appropriately, impunity is commonplace, even in the highest office of the country, further breeding crude governance, with the citizens progressively losing confidence in the government (IRI 2013). Yet, the present warring parties, no matter how much they point fingers at each other, are appropriately faulted by masses for their share in maladministration and mismanagement of the nation's resources and other affairs. In this respect, Dr. Riek and company embody as little hope as do their colleagues in the government.

The second political exposition concerns power grappling in the ruling party. The power race in the SPLM, perhaps a three-decade old phenomenon, has ostensibly replaced party's social and political programs upon which the liberation exercise was built and concerted. Notably, the SPLM party might have truly lost direction, control or both, making the nascent country vulnerable to political instability as the recent skirmishes forthrightly exhibit. Specifically and recently, guided democracy has increasingly surfaced in the party, with President Salva Kiir Mayardit accused of unconstitutionally firing his elected colleagues on unsatisfying accusations. The constitutionality of the President's action regarding the firing of elected governors is obviously contested. However, the presence of such a clause in the constitution as in allowing the President to unseat other elected colleagues, coupled with the fact that the President seems to be misusing it, has certainly emerged as a fundamental political problem. Consequently, the actions of the President have been characterized as autocratic, with this totalitarianism causally emerging with the transitional constitution that confers upon the top administrator of the country such an unprecedented control.

A deliberately dictated constitution presents a third political exposition. Views from the population seem to suggest that South Sudan's transitional constitution was developed in the cult of the highest office, not the country. In the periods leading up to the final production of the country's supreme instrument of governance, politicians like Dr. Riek Machar (himself considered an elegant opportunist by many), flanked by numerous civil organizations, expressed genuine pleas over tremendously skewed constitutional powers. One particular stipulation that substantially animated political uproar in the country at the time concerns the President's authority to fire elected governors. Others include the blurred Presidential term limit and the appropriate distribution of powers among the government's three branches. Undoubtedly, Dr. Riek's observations were deserved, but his intention in identifying these constitutional drawbacks was probably not that altruistic: personal political ambitions or survival might have necessitated his criticisms. All the same, the bulk of counter-suggestions were made, but were outright dismissed, of course, with little convincing ascertainties from those involved or might have been close to the center of power where most country's decisions seem to be made. While Dr. Riek presented his views of the constitution, President Kiir accused him of insubordination and an attempt to develop a divergent structure in what is supposedly a single system. This ultimately set a stage for political acrimony and the SPLM eventually saw an increased infighting in the periods that followed.

This kind of political environment, sadly, seems to have bred conditions of indiscipline, indifference, and hypocrisy, ultimately resulting in an incoherent political culture in the SPLM and by extension, the country. And due to lack of a coherent political culture that is inclusive and tolerant of dissenting views in the country, individual's political ambitions and power desires have replaced institutional priorities, creating unfettered sets of politicians, the result being power race that has finally produced a violent conflict in an infant nation.

Before the December 6 unifying press conference, the SPLM was probably fragmented into factions of top leadership aspirants, namely Mama Nyandeng Garang, Pagan Amum, Dr. Riek Machar, and President Salva Kiir. It is to be noted that the resultant unity among the so-called 'disgruntled' members of the SPLM likely sprang from the isolating decisions of the party's Chair, President Salva Kiir Mayardit. But there certainly was a conflict of interest when the top three in the dissident group—Nyandeng, Pagan and Riek— declared their intentions to run for the SPLM Chairmanship while at the same time trying to advocate for change within the party. This created a suspicion and probably made the President unreceptive to the demands of change as expressed by his colleagues.

Due to the absence of discipline in the SPLM, the December 6 press had some violence-inciting call, unnecessarily invoking the army and accusing President Kiir of sidelining the so-called real SPLA commanders—a clear incitement meant to win the recently dismissed military officers to the group's side, perhaps in anticipation of some future undertaking. In reference to some unconstitutional decisions made by President Kiir, for example, the group stated that the gentleman's "intention is to sideline and prevent SPLM historical leaders and cadres categorized as 'potential competitors' from participation in the Convention. This is a very dangerous move and is likely to plunge the party and the country into the abyss." In addition, the group stressed four fundamental complaints, namely:

- General Salva Kiir's departure from the SPLM vision championed by Dr. John Garang, a reference to an increased involvement in the party's affairs of the NCP turned SPLM members.
- General Salva Kiir's attempt to sabotage the SPLM national organs in appointing cabinet members by substituting regional and ethnic lobbies.
- General Salva Kiir's frustrating attempts to transform the SPLM from a liberation movement into a robust political party.
- Lack of coordination in the SPLM organs, referring to the chair's use of his executive powers to manage the party.

The group also accused President Kiir of having recruited his own army, those recently trained in the outskirts of Juba and who are reported to have been from a single ethnic group, the Dinka, from the President's state of Warrap. Earlier on, reports were circulated about a Presidential guards unit being trained and graduated without the military's Chief of Staff's blessing. Whether or not this indictment is true is immaterial; what is rather material is that such an un-repudiated claim did ameliorate serious disagreements among SPLM leaders. Above all, if this accusation is true, then the act violates the true culture of institutionalizing the national armed forces.

While some parts of the press were rather toxic and clearly incited potential for crisis, the President's camp response issued by Vice President Wani certainly added fuel to the already burning fire (December 8). Vice President Wani uncharacteristically remarked, referring to his colleagues as "some disgruntled elements" of the SPLM who recently lost their seats in the government. "These people are a disgruntled group united by a common

cause of having lost power or influence either in the party or the government”, the message read. The Vice President continued to remark as saying, “The misguided understanding of the group about what running a state is, comes out repeatedly in their press statement and words.”

From a cultured bureaucratic perspective, the manner in which the Vice President responded implies a remarkable deficiency in the institutional restraints, cheaply resorting to name-calling. Holding all else invariable, this confirms the SPLM’s institutional indiscipline and its inability to effectively resolve its internal vices. This antagonistic paradigm to resolving internal issues in the SPLM could be partly blamed for a deadly violence that struck the country on December the 15th.

Social Explanation

Having squandered opportunities for positively transforming the social conditions of South Sudanese, the SPLM-led government now faces a political dilemma that weaves political and social phenomena together. Due to a high prevalence of abject poverty that the government has done little about in a population that is largely youth, December 15 was just a matter of time—we at the Sudd Institute long predicted and warned against this uncertainty. In the absence of a meaningful youth development agenda, sizable young South Sudanese have succumbed to a politicized soldiering, largely along ethnic lines.

The fact that the rural population, which represents over 80 percent of the country’s population, has been ignored in the country’s development programming, presents an optimal recipe for instability. Lack of basic services for the ordinary citizenry—where many as 51 out of a 100 South Sudanese live below the poverty line—is an added uncertainty. The government has provided very limited funding towards human capital enhancement programs, such as education and health. The pervasive level of poverty in the population has been met with insufficient interventions.

The significance of social causes, to this effect, is that they fan politics, often negatively. In situations like this, idle and hungry youth become easy recruits into armed groups, and are used to carry out much of the violence, as we have witnessed with the Lou Nuer White Army in Jonglei State. Despite the knowledge that South Sudan has been facing this threat for the last 8 years, its central authority has not been able to conceive of any preventative programs, particularly those constituting development and opportunities for the youth.

After a long war, there is an underlying mistrust owed primarily to lack of social programs and common values that bind the country together, especially in times of political polarization. The peace and reconciliation efforts have been rather late and insufficient.

In a sense, this recent violence is partly an attribute of this failed social development, and has as well significantly contributed to several military desertions in the interim period.

Institutional Explanation

Institutional futility equally impedes stability in South Sudan, particularly within the SPLM. The SPLM leadership has been very dubious or crude in its political programs or leadership succession strategies. Institutional structures, both in the party and the government, emphasize a great deal of one-man state, mainly the President. Surely, there is no programming that paves way for future leaders. Likewise, there are allegations that

the President has been making decisions without involving the party organs or his colleagues in his administration, a clear violation of party principles.

This institutional distortion distresses aspirations and ambitions of emerging leaders, resulting in political infighting as the current crisis aptly demonstrates. That is, since institutions do not guarantee democratic rights and/or access to political power, or basic services for that matter, the mundane consequence is uprising, whatever dimension it may take. Instead of using institutional structures of the SPLM, many members of the party fear that President Kiir and his advisors have been resorting to intimidation tactics as a way to silent their unsatisfied peers, placing personalities above party's interest. More appropriately, recent personalized speeches from the SPLM Chair in response to December 6 Press release by a team loyal to his former Vice President, inflamed an already volatile political situation in the country. Whatever grievances tabled by the group should have been institutionally addressed. That is, although institutional in nature, the fight within the SPLM got personalized and as a result, institutional frameworks were ignored, certainly feeding an ongoing unrest.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis suggests that attempts to bring about peace in South Sudan prompt emphasis on political, social, and institutional causes of instability or civil unrest. A political system that ignores these factors is bound to face unrest, civil or otherwise. But first thing first! The cessation of hostilities is of immediate importance. However, a long-term solution ought to emphasize the vitality of political, social, and institutional factors in creating a stable society in South Sudan, especially the role of youth in violence. The ongoing peace negotiations in Addis between the government and the rebels should seriously consider these factors, giving a roadmap for implementation in anticipation of potential harmony. A meaningful stability in the country may result from improved long-term political freedom, both in the SPLM and the country; elimination of impunity and the installation of closely enforced accountability; and respect for institutional structures, particularly the constitution. The constitutional provisions that grant the President powers to remove other elected authorities should be altogether barred, for they breed tyranny.

About Sudd Institute

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

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