THE SUDD INSTITUTE
RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

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A Fallacy of Failed States Index

The Case of South Sudan

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On June 24, 2013 the Fund for Peace (FFP) released its highly consumed publication on failed states Index (FSI) that covered 178 countries, with South Sudan as its newest constituent[1]. The FSI's assessment relies upon 12 social, economic, and political indicators, each constituting 10 points. Scoring 110.6, South Sudan, while nearing its second independence anniversary, got ranked the world's fourth failed state of the year, marginally winning over its rump neighbor, the Sudan. That South Sudan ranked minutely better is not at all surprising. The result generated a wide range of responses across a host of audience, with South Sudan's state authorities calling it an inconsiderate characterization, partly because of the infant status of a historically subjugated country. A few in the aid community were hesitant to make sense of the evidence that seems to carry a great deal of scholastic sophistication. Yet in much of South Sudanese citizenry, the report confirmed longstanding fears of uncertain transition led by an inexperienced tribe of guerrilla liberators, extreme corruption, lack of nuanced development and service delivery agenda, and the increasing insecurity impasse bedeviling the country's largest state, Jonglei.

A useful experimental tool, the FSI is intended to warn the world community against ramifications of states' fragility. Precisely and rightly so, the Index postulates that state failure anywhere might have some serious implications for most, if not all, nations, particularly as the globalized and technologically connected world system is susceptible to spillover vulnerabilities. This is clearly reflected by, for example, the current conflict in the Sudan, resulting in mass refugee flows into South Sudan and neighboring states, straining security and basic services there. Similarly, the violence in the Sudan has substantially raised humanitarian obligations related costs, many of them funded through global courtesy.

[1] This response was drafted in June but its publication got delayed due to other operational and research priorities.

The FSI's social, economic, and political environment indicators are an intelligent paradigm of assessing state fragility and failure. A great deal of these indicators, namely the demographic pressures, controversial state legitimacy, inadequate service delivery, inequality, heavy reliance on external influence, disharmony among elites, sectional grievance, and incredibly contested human rights conditions, are palpably concerning in South Sudan. In particular, the use of grievance factors, such as ethnic heterogeneity, to assess the country's state of being, resonates profoundly with the South Sudanese context, where invariable ethnic rivalries, whether engineered externally or internally, threaten the state's legitimacy and stability.

Though the Index is critically valuable in perhaps relevant contexts, it suffers a major caveat that discernibly makes South Sudan an immaterial unit of analysis. The FSI is remarkably insensitive to history or time, particularly in 2013. Not controlling for history or period factors noticeably makes the Index quite crude, and less instructive. Clearly, 'failure' is a relative concept derived from 'success' associated with, among others, history. A state recently born out of another state's failure, inheriting much of the mother state's historical baggage, South Sudan's inclusion in the Index is not necessarily deserved. To be sure, before South Sudan's independence Sudan consistently ranked third or higher in the Index's preceding periods. The Index recognized such unpleasant inheritance in 2011 and 2012, however, essentially with South Sudan not ranked in both years. As if it has been many years since the newest state gained its fledgling statehood, the Index included South Sudan, unsurprisingly ranking it fourth among failed states. While it is a moot point how long exactly the states emerging out of grave conflicts take to stabilize or realize meaningful growth, two years is certainly insufficient for appraising conditions that indisputably require long-term transformations.

South Sudan's political and security experience under the Sudan, which is abundantly researched, ultimately makes further but unrefined characterizations in this area rather less informative, at least for a number of decades down the road. That is, South Sudan can be optimally defined as a function of longstanding failed governance, religious and racial persecution, corruption, and human rights abuses in the Sudan. For over 40 years, South Sudanese fought against systemic Islamic and Arab based discriminatory governance, terrorism, and methodical under-development. Eventually, South Sudan emerged out of a country that previously housed a notorious terrorist, Osama bin Laden, for years. But this is not all. Sudan was accused of genocide prior to the secession of the South. Many years before that, the country was economically sanctioned by the United States in response to a series of human rights violation charges. Worse still, the head of the Sudanese government sits indicted by The Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC). Additionally, South Sudan deserted a nation that monitors women's dress code, with serious consequences for religiously coded indecency, and whose security forces gang-rape women for participating in public protests. Finally, in 2011, Transparency International ranked Sudan 177th corrupt state out of 183 countries.

It is this historical baggage with which South Sudan will continue to be identified for a considerable time period. So, indeed, South Sudan is presumably a failed state by virtue of its history. But that South Sudan is beginning to rank minutely better over Sudan is particularly revealing of the new state's efforts towards positive transition. It is this long existing reality of acutely desired transition that makes the current inclusion of South Sudan in the Index quite imprudent, not to speak of the potential damage to the morale of such young country such designation could spur.

Yet the South Sudanese government must not shield itself with failed history indefinitely, making it a proximal excuse for its substandard performance. It is common knowledge that Juba authorities are doing very little in creating South Sudan that looks less like Sudan, especially in providing essentials of security, standard human development, service delivery, curbing official looting, professional transformation of civil administration and security organs, promoting the rule of law and democratic processes, and building a common destiny for all. Deserting Sudan in pursuance of liberty, freedom, and prosperity fundamentals, which came with admiration globally, constitutes that South Sudan must now craft an exemplary new identity, with demonstrable, measurable outcomes in governance and its constituents. In attempts to progressively look less like Sudan, South Sudan should develop considerable strides/pace in curtailing pervasive tribal violence and rebellion in Jonglei State to ensure sustained peace and stability, improving service delivery, introducing practical measures against rampant corruption, and embracing an inclusive system of government. Most important, the ruling party (SPLM) should refrain from oppressive rhetoric, tolerate political dissent, promote fundamental liberties and human rights, advocate for multiparty politics, and administer the country on the basis of ideological influence.

Moreover, the country should uphold the principles it diligently fought for, respect public choice as in elections, strictly adhere to checks and balance, and promote economic growth through increased investments in agriculture, education/technology, and health. The recent events that encircled the president intimidating the peoples' house into endorsing his speaker's nominee, suppression of dissent within the ruling party, dismissal of elected officials on political grounds, expulsion of a UN human rights observer on whims, the killing of an innocent Kenyan teacher over a flag, the intimidation by some security agents of political commentators and journalists, and the murder of a formidable political analyst, Isaiah Abraham, surely distort the country's image. All of this is Sudan in practice, and maintaining such an unflattering feature ultimately sustains South Sudan's state failure in perhaps most contexts. This is a challenge that requires a comprehensive, well-coordinated, and disciplined intervention, not liberation related hubris. In response, while meeting other trajectories of informed progress, South Sudan's expectation would be to move down by at least 5 nations in the Index annually.

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.

About the Author

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