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Weekly Review

March 9, 2013

South Sudan: A Politics of Demise or a Vision for Progress?

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The Republic of South Sudan has made tremendous progress on several developmental fronts, including establishment of institutions of governance, reformation of the military, structuring of public service, taking great strides in education and health care, much of which was, admittedly, possible through foreign aid. But as a country that is among the world's most war-torn countries since World War II and where everything from infrastructure to food to health to transportation has been a priority, what it has achieved in the past few years is remarkable. However, there remains many daunting challenges that have confronted the young state since the end of the war with the north in 2005 and independence in 2011. Most important of these challenges are insecurity, economic woes resulting from discontinued oil production over disputes with Sudan, insufficient national cohesion, and lack of well-coordinated home-grown national development plan that has specific goals and a clear roadmap. These challenges, despite being independent of each other, have collectively produced three other dynamics, which are now the most talked about issues, at least in urban centers and among the literate population. These dynamics include the on-going review of the transitional constitution, national reconciliation effort spearheaded by the Vice President Riek Machar Teny, and the relations with the Republic of Sudan.

This week's Sudd Institute review takes a look at these dynamics in order to assess their weight in terms of nation-building, to evaluate relevant public debates, and to map out what direction the citizens think the country is headed. Are we up for possible political fallout that further destabilizes the nation or an open democratic society where citizens can challenge their government and demand better discharge of public office without fear of harassment?

On the question of the national constitutional review, so many citizens of this country have commented in public forums, online, and newspaper opinion pieces, saying that the process has started on the wrong foot and it is increasingly losing its main aim, which is to produce a constitution that results from wider consultations with the public, a foundational document that would bind all of us to our new nation and reduce our need for ethnic loyalties. The public fear, that the process is lost, emanates from four main developments, the first being the way the National Constitutional Review Commission was formed, a process that was highly politicized, dominated by the ruling party, and filled with

politicians who aren't necessarily technocrats and who have little time to invest in the process. The result of such a composition is that the politicians who had produced the transitional constitution before independence are now the same ones who are controlling the current process and are suspected of controlling this exercise with their own political careers in mind, rather than doing it for future generations.

The second source of fear is that the review exercise has already taken a full year without producing anything tangible, exhausting its mandate and leading to a decision by the national parliament to amend the transitional constitution in order to accommodate the extension of the mandate for an additional two years. The third development is the declaration by the Commission that it did not receive the necessary funding to enable it carry out its terms of reference, leaving questions about why the parliament thinks the extension alone is going to make a difference if there is no clear financial commitments made to it. The commission is talking about funding and the parliament thinks that giving more time will do the trick. The extension of the commission's mandate without any sign that the government would fund the process in the next two years is futile. Without such clear statement as to where the funds would come this time around, a source that was not available in the past year, it is very likely that the two years will also go by with very little accomplishment by the commission. Interestingly, the commissioners will continue to be paid, housed in expensive hotels, and given expensive cars—a huge cost to the public. Lastly, people fear that this exercise, judging by the attitude and statements of some the members of the commission, has already excluded the majority of the citizens from the process. For example, some commission members have gone on record saying that they do not think that illiterate citizens, the majority in this country, have business getting involved in the constitution review exercise.

Continuing with the process despite these mishaps, in the view of many ordinary citizens, legitimizes citizens' suspicions that our political leaders are often quick to dismiss them, demonstrating the lack of political will on the part of the nation's leadership, particularly the ruling party, the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM), to produce the permanent constitution in a timely manner and to make it a document that has given the people a sense of ownership, even if it is symbolic, so that it enjoys the respect of the majority of the citizens and give it legitimacy. In other words, there is no clear commitment to producing a constitution that unites the country, shapes the relationship between the people and the state, one with a long-term view. Why any leader would want a constitution that does not meet with the respect of the majority of its supposed owners is hard to understand.

On the question of national reconciliation, there is no doubt that South Sudan, a country with such a long history of violence from outside and from within, needs to go through an exercise of reckoning with that past, if it is to move forward and remain united. The need for such reconciliation is underscored by the continuing conflicts between and within tribes, by the increasing violence at all levels of society and by what some might refer to as trauma. This suggests that the country's leadership should confront the past head on to allow a healthy healing process. It is therefore, with a sense of relief that the nation

responded positively to the recent announcement by the Vice President of the Republic on a newly organized national reconciliation exercise.

However, the Vice President's proposal quickly raised a lot of questions when it became clear just how he intended to go about this exercise. Some of the questions asked include whether the Vice President is championing it in his personal capacity as an elder and statesman or is it a state-driven exercise, how the state is going to justify a national reconciliation on past events while ethnic-based killing continues and how broad-based in terms of geographic coverage is this process going to be. These are all very poignant questions and how clear and honest we answer these questions can make or break the process.

First of all, there is the issue of the history of atrocities, ethnic conflicts, agreement on their locations, and the identification of key actors, which must all be aimed at establishing the parameters of the problem, before embarking on the planning. An exercise of this sort must not be seen as a matter of our leaders appealing to our hearts, telling us to forget the past and move on with our lives in order to build the nation. Atrocities of the kind that South Sudan is now starring in the face are not remembered by who lost or who gained, but rather through long lasting wounds, empty holes in our hearts, the parentless children, the empty beds and livelihoods destroyed, which must all be addressed in honest conversations in which leaders like the Vice President, a man who has so far unequivocally demonstrated his humility, are willing to look everyone of us in the eye and say sorry for my role, real or perceived, in the mess we have created. Pushing a poorly thought through exercise, no matter how well-intentioned it may be, only creates room for speculations for the motives of the leaders behind it, as it is already being done, whereby some people are already suggesting that the Vice President is only doing this for the mere purpose of building political capital. Allowing the process to be publicly critiqued and scrutinized can only add value toward a desirable outcome.

Regarding the relationship with the Republic of Sudan, the main issue relates to the opacity that surrounds the negotiations, whereby South Sudan's negotiating team travels to Addis Ababa for talks with Sudan's team, but the public never gets updates on how the negotiations are progressing. Cursory press statements upon return from Addis Ababa have not been sufficiently educational to the public about the fate of their nation at the hands of the negotiators. Another issue is the "stuffing" of the negotiating teams with politicians, especially ministers, some of whom lack technical capacity in terms of subject matter of negotiations and are only on the team merely by the virtue of their ministerial position, which is not a justified qualification for negotiation. Furthermore, while South Sudan has demonstrated that it is the party most committed to peace, stability of the border regions and oil wealth sharing, there is no question that the management of the relationships, which institutions or individuals are in charge of speaking on these issues, and what specific story should be articulated by everyone involved, have all been murky at best and haphazard at worst. How can our nation be respected and trusted by the world and by our opponents if the story keeps changing?

For a country whose history of liberation was hinged on demands for an open democratic country, it is natural that the critiques listed above, like the rest of citizens' efforts to voice their concerns, have been made in hope that the country would live up to the expectations in order to move away from the practices of the old Sudan and encourage open debate. However, there has been a climate of fear resulting from what appears to be an attempt by the state to narrow the political space. There have been too many incidents in which criticism of public officials or efforts to widen freedom of speech have been suppressed. One of the truly puzzling behaviors among our political leaders is the extreme sensitivity to criticism. When a leader is handed a responsibility, be it the constitutional review, reconciliation, management of the negotiations with Khartoum over the separation issues, or any other question of national significance, our leaders take it so personally and get really upset when the citizens try to challenge them. Unfortunately, some of our leaders think that being asked to lead the nation on any given responsibility is to assume exclusive ownership of that process.

Putting one person in a leadership position today is not to exclude the views of the rest, and being criticized is often not aimed at destroying that process but to simply point out the blind spots that the leader cannot see while driving the process; it is to continuously shape the project at hand toward an end product that every citizen can recognize themselves represented in. Constructively engaging with public officials is healthy for a participatory system of governance, a tested positive technique for an effective leadership. When the subject at hand is such a crucial one, so central to the foundation of a cohesive nation, our leaders need to be tolerant of any dissenting views, welcome the debate and incorporate such views into their work. After all, whatever decisions one makes today do not only affect that individual but everyone, and for generations to come. If experiences of many other countries are any guide, a measure of leadership is a collective effort to come up with a vision that leads the country to progress and prosperity, tolerance and consideration of dissenting views. Any other attitude short of that has been observed to lead to weak political systems and faltering economies, as lack of freedom discourages individual enterprise. We must choose visionary leadership over politics demise.

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

Jok Madut Jok is the Executive Director and a co-founder of the Sudd Institute. He is the author of three books and numerous articles covering gender, sexuality and reproductive health, humanitarian aid, ethnography of political violence, gender-based violence, war and slavery, and the politics of identity in Sudan.