



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## Weekly Review

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### In 2013 Reflect Upon 2012

*A Review of the New Year's Call from President Kiir*

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The week leading to the end of 2012 and the beginning of a new year was quite significant and a time of reflection among South Sudanese. For some, it marked the end of a brutish year characterized by violence and economic hardships. Some individuals, including President Salva Kiir, seemed to expect 2013 to be a year of hope, tranquility, and prosperity in South Sudan. For others, the focus was on holiday excitement and festivities, involving church attendance, visiting family and exchanging messages of hope for a peaceful and prosperous 2013.

The past year certainly presented some of the most unfavorable experiences for the people of South Sudan and their leaders. While the citizens wrestled with increasingly worsening economic circumstances due to oil shutdown and increased insecurity across the board, the authorities were faced with difficult decisions concerned with how to effectively intervene in order to preserve citizenry's aspirations of stability and success. For President Salva Kiir Mayardit, responding to progressively taxing violence, both in the capital Juba and Wau, Western Bahr El Ghazal State, added to existing challenges of a difficult year. As it is expected of all democratically elected leaders, President Salva responded by meeting with varied levels of South Sudanese community, including security forces, state and federal authorities, and individual constituencies to give support and discuss future plans.

Eventually, 2012 became history and 2013 quickly rolled in. President Salva celebrated the arrival of 2013 by humbly addressing the citizenry in a magnificently well thought through and written letter. The Citizen Newspaper published President Salva Kiir's New Year message, entitled *Dear citizens, my fellow countrymen and women*, in which he forthrightly called upon all citizens to 'reflect on the past to enable us to learn lessons to build a stronger future.' The president's message cited particular challenges facing the infant country, namely rising food prices, adverse relations with Northern Sudan,

consequences of austerity measures, and an increasingly deteriorating national security. The message also referenced the nation's minimal progress and the leadership's future plans to move the country forward. This is a great message of hope from the people's leader, suggesting that his leadership will make the newer periods much better for South Sudanese.

While the address seeks the citizens' reflection upon the past in order to create a more favorable future, it also implicitly calls for a similar reflection on the extent to which the president has historically managed other events of national significance. To be sure, history seems to suggest that the president has not been interacting much with the general public, indicating a highly strained relationship between the citizenry and their leader. Being a democratically elected authority means regularly attending to the needs of the electorate, which President Salva seemed to have well demonstrated in his New Year's message. Previously, such needed practice on the side of the president has been quite minimal.

The president's public reassurance of a better future as well as delving into day-to-day circumstances the ordinary citizenry faces indicates that the president cares, feels for, and relates to those who might not be so privileged. Unsurprisingly, this is what true leaders do, a rare practice on the African continent. The South Sudanese problem, however, is that their president has not been making that many public appearances, particularly as circumstances of national importance arise. A number of such events have come and gone without public-tailored responses from the president. For instance, the president made no public appearance either in writing or person when over 600 South Sudanese were massacred in Jonglei in 2011, an incident that seriously threatened the nation's stability. In September this previous year, when the citizens of Northern Bahr el Ghazal publicly expressed concern over the Sudan-South Sudan's crude agreement, which theoretically annexed part (14 miles) of their land to the north, yet the people's leader did little to clarify the pact and calm down the resultant protests. Likewise, the cold-blooded murder of Isaiah Abraham by unknown assassins presented yet another opportunity for the president to come closer to the people. Unfortunately, he did little to respond before the public and did not show up at the funeral to console the grieving crowd, though other government officials attended.

Despite the president's regular attempts to communicate with the governed through his subordinates, specifically the Ministry of Information, having a direct communication with the people ultimately carries a greater weight, as has been well presented by his new year's letter. His recent visit to Wau to share in the aftermath of a destructive ethnic violence there portrays

leadership and is evident of what the president needs to undertake to strengthen his communication and relations with the people. But what does this represent moving forward? There are a number of options that, if effectively enlisted, may lead to improved communication between the president and the citizens. These include the president's New Year's message, indeed, a great point of departure for the leader.

To be viewed as *leader* rather than a *ruler*, President Salva should increase his public visibility, particularly during national economic or security crises. The President should also periodically give a state of the nation address to highlight the country's strategies for tackling its current problems and to assuage public fears. In addition to publishing in the newspapers, the president should also consider delivering his messages via the national television service. There is a humane aspect of being emotionally engaged in person than remotely through text. Finally, the president-to-people communication could be better improved through a strengthened Public Relations capacity in the Office of the President. The absence of a competent Public Relations branch within the Office of the President has often fueled some serious misunderstandings in the public, with numerous and tarnishing accusations labeled against the system easily passing undisputed.

Moving forward, all of this calls for a better communication strategy within the Office of the President, something that would bring the president closer to the people, with the New Year's message inaugurating such a new strategy.

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### **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**

Augustino Ting Mayai is the Director of Research at the Sudd Institute. His major research interests include childhood mortality differentials in the Sudan and South Sudan, applied quantitative methodology (econometrics), applied development research, social accountability and public service delivery, and the demography of conflicts and violence.