



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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The Proliferating Rebellion in South Sudan: Its Explanations and Implications

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Introduction

Just a few years following independence, South Sudan struggles to form as a state. While the economy rapidly sinks, politically motivated insurrections and ethnic feuds seem to be on the rise countrywide. Since the outbreak of the 2013 war, poverty, as well as street banditry, have become increasingly prevalent, especially in major towns and along the highways. Some observers and South Sudanese alike suggest the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCISS) that was reached between the government and the major rebel group, the SPLM-IO, in August 2015, and which was hoped to alleviate these circumstances, has collapsed. The July State House violence, which forced Dr. Riek Machar out of Juba and his replacement with Gen. Taban Deng Gai as First Vice President of the Republic, for example, are readily referenced as significant impediments to the agreement.

And the future looks depressing. Upon resurfacing in Khartoum, Dr. Machar and the Political Bureau members of his IO faction resolved to violently oust the Juba regime¹, accusing President Salva Kiir of being a burden to reconciliation and peace in the country. Other militant voices against the government have since heightened. Dr. Lam Akol, former chairman of the Democratic Change Party, which has members in the recently reconstituted Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA) and who seems to have once commanded some respect for pursuing reforms nonviolently, recently unveiled a plan² to militarily contest Juba's top seat using a newly formed revolutionary front: the National Democratic Movement (NDM). The NDM's manifesto is premised on engendering sustainable democracy through radical social and political transformations in South Sudan. Similarly, Gen. Khalid Boutros³ of the Murle's Cobra armed group, a constituent of the South Sudan Democratic Movement/Army, has declared war against the government, as he alleges the Kiir's administration lacks interest in measured peace.

¹ <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/splm-io-leadership-khartoum-declares-war-against-kiir>

² <https://paanluelwel.com/2016/09/02/dr-lam-akols-new-political-vehicle-the-national-democratic-movement-ndm/>

³ <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article60364>

Indeed, a more recent surge in or proliferation of insurgent undertakings against the government renders peace elusive in an-already distraught nation. For nearly a decade now, several armed groups have emerged all over the country, with some of them sometimes signing agreements with the government that last only a very short time. What normally follows, as historically evident, is a cycle of rebellions and sojourning political settlements, with rebel leaders shuttling between Juba and the trenches. This cycle between insurrection and peace incredibly threatens long-term stability in South Sudan, with innocent civilians made vulnerable to all kinds of negative consequences. But why has rebellion become so entrenched an instrument of airing political grievances in the nation? Several explanations readily come to mind and which this review endeavors to highlight. Such explanations include narrowed political settlements, increasingly tightening political space (for dissent), and apathy towards fundamental reforms.

Political settlements

Since the CPA era, South Sudan has experienced a host of insurrections, many of which often culminate in some sort of ephemeral political settlement. When these settlements are negotiated and finally signed, little do they reflect the prevailing grievances of the wider communities from which a certain leader of the insurgent group and combatants come. Instead, an unnecessary emphasis gets placed on how to politically and economically cater to the individual leaders of the rebellions. Given example, rebel leaders who sign agreements with the government soon get military promotions and lucrative political assignments, eventually moving to Juba and joining the elite's club. Once this arrangement is effected, the people for and from whom the leader waged a rebellion cease to be relevant. This situation only exacerbates people's dissatisfaction with the authorities, especially those at the center.

When the state places little importance on the social contract that underlies the government-people's bond, it risks bolstering popular uprisings. Under a functioning social contract the government guarantees people's rights to basic services and safety. Through the liberation that culminated in the CPA, South Sudanese people contracted the SPLM to deliver them from the yoke of oppression and to manage their communal and personal affairs, granting it the authority to enforce laws and agreements, before and after attaining peace. Recent empirical analyses show, however, that the SPLM's popularity is in considerable decline due to its substandard performance. The party's investment in basic services is considered dismal at best. Despite high expenditures on security as many as 1,100⁴ internal violent conflicts occurred in South Sudan between 2006 and 2013, an average of roughly 140 annually, which translates into 1,300 fatalities each year. Notably, a citizenry that is guaranteed services and protection has a lot to lose if it were to engage in some form of system's destabilization.

Consequently, only 35 percent of the South Sudanese expressed being very satisfied with the party's performance in 2013⁵, with the unsatisfied referencing the party's inability to secure the citizens and adequately stamp out pervasive corruption (IRI 2013). The

⁴ Author's calculations from ACLED, 1997-2013

⁵ IRI's Survey of South Sudan Public Opinion, 2013

SPLM's commissioned study also confirms such popular sentiment. Expectedly, the absence of state in ordinary people's regular lives entrenches popular resentment against that state. Thus, it is coherent that clever but disgruntled politicians essentially take advantage of government's limited presence in the life of an ordinary folk by manipulating the innocents and enlisting radical tools for change, including political violence. This enables the discontented politicians to craft an attractive revolutionary theme and easily gather support from a disenfranchised grassroots and eventually wage war against the system.

Secondly, that rebellion is handsomely rewarded in South Sudan ultimately makes for the country's enduring political instability. Because more peaceful models for negotiating political power are rarely recognized in South Sudan, it is only intuitive for rational political players to rebel, negotiate a peace deal that satisfies personal or universal objectives, hop to Juba, and become generals, ministers or both. Sanctioned as it appears, rebellion/political violence, hence, assumes the principal means of contesting and accessing political authority in the country. Clearly, longstanding peaceful political dialogues become undesirable, as they are not incentivized as much as the violent uprising.

Tightening space for dissent

Opposition parties and leaders have complained of being restricted to operate freely. Dr. Lam Akol, formerly with the Democratic Party (DC) and now the NDM, complains of lack of fundamental freedoms in the country. Members of the civil society have also expressed the same sentiment. They accuse the state of encroaching upon their civil liberties and freedoms. Predictably, many of these citizens have often ended up supporting radical institutions. Dr. Lam Akol and Nhial Bol Aken of the defunct Citizen Newspaper are a perfect example in this respect. This suggests that a narrowing political space, where there is considerable power struggle and limited political consensus, actually heightens insecurity and bolsters radical political thought.

Apathy towards reforms

The SPLM-led government has for long been challenged to institute far-reaching reforms for good governance in the country. One chief area that has invoked a substantial level of public criticism toward the government is the insufficient handling of accountability matters, especially as corruption becomes incredibly widespread. In the IRI's 2013 study, only 14 percent of the South Sudanese thought the government was doing enough to combat corruption. The citizenry's dissatisfaction with how the government has been handling the economy compounds this view. Seventy-six percent of the South Sudanese, for example, thought the country's economy was headed in the wrong direction in 2013 (IRI 2013). The other ubiquitously cited area of concern is the sorely desired improvement of the national security situation, which has seen limited progress in the last decade. Only forty-one percent of the IRI's respondents said the national government was doing its best to reduce conflicts and insecurity. Lastly, there has been considerable concern of inadequate service delivery. For instance, the government spends marginally on health and education and massively on security and political programs.

Calls for measured institutional responses to the above social, security, and political problems do not seem to have been sufficiently heeded, effectively giving rise to or strengthening opposition's voices. Most manifestos of the revolutionary groups are founded on such reform agenda. For instance, the NDM's manifesto states: South Sudanese have been "subjected to bad governance, corruption, violations of their fundamental freedoms with impunity and denied basic services such as health, education and infrastructure."

Summary

As rebellion mushrooms in South Sudan, intractable instability is amplified. Prevailing approaches to managing political, social, and security matters affecting the country have been unsatisfactory, many observers suggest. In particular, rewarding rebel leaders with positions and at times material resources as enshrined in narrowly framed political settlements is only a Band-Aid to the nation's enduring transitional challenges. This creates incentives for more rebellions. As opposed to giving an unwarranted attention to personalities leading certain rebellions, ensuing political settlements should instead address grievances of the wider population. A disenfranchised youth easily gets attracted to a violent group that promises them future opportunities. The government should strengthen its handle of social contract matters. This could be achieved through the development of sound, robust, and responsive public institutions. Moreover, the government ought to provide adequate services, while strengthening accountability and transparency measures countrywide. Instituting political dialogues as a sure away of negotiating political authority may lessen the emergence of radical groups. Considering measured institutional reforms, protection of civil liberties and freedoms ought to be one of the political leadership's priorities. Doing so engenders a political environment where fundamental differences on governance are debated and acted upon civilly. Only then can a stable South Sudan be attained.

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.

Author's Biography

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