



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

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President Salva Kiir Mayardit's Visit to Khartoum: Goals and Outcomes

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1 Introduction

In South Sudan, as it is in all countries where people have been living under severe war-induced hardships, where uncertainties for the future are most crushing and where the government of the day is shrouded in suspicion about its complicity in or direct responsibility for these hardships, people look to the top political leadership for answers. As the situation of the country reaches a state of despair, there have been complaints of leadership deficit. The leadership of the country faces questions about the fate of its people every day. This is compounded by the fact that the state has not been communicative with the public on its plans to address the misery. This has now meant that every move the leadership makes and everything it says are a focus of scrutiny from all directions, just as they should, because people are looking to it to rescue the country. But very little that is life-saving, or at the very minimum something that provides hope, has come from the State to date. This is not to assume plans and visions do not exist, but rather to say, if they do, they have never been communicated to the public, to give people hope that the state is thinking of them and acting in the interest of their welfare. All that has happened, judging by the level of violence in the country, by the run-away corruption, by the nearly obliterated economy, and by the impasse in political settlements, is state's inability to discharge its basic functions.

This is the backdrop to the way in which the President's recent two-day visit to Khartoum was received and interrogated, with its outcomes greatly anticipated. The President was expected to return with tangible gains from the talks with the Sudanese leaders. Some commentators suggest the visit was a recognition of the reality that Sudan, the country from which South Sudan seceded in 2011, still wields power over South Sudan. Others say it was a long overdue return to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement's spirit of creating two peaceful countries living in harmony with each other and within themselves. In fact, the President's visit to Khartoum was watched more intensely than any of his other foreign travels, with the attention it garnered within South Sudan itself becoming a sign that most

South Sudanese still view Sudan as vital for the stability of their own country, whether one thought Sudan was bad news for South Sudan or that good relations with Sudan were critical for South Sudan's stability and capacity to function in the interests of its citizens.

This visit was unique in many ways. Sudan remains a subject of suspicion among South Sudanese. Many South Sudanese believe that Khartoum is bent on undermining the security, the economy and the diplomatic status of its new neighbor, so that perhaps its citizens may regret their decision to break away. There are many people, including government officials, who blame Sudan for much of what has gone wrong in South Sudan. Khartoum is thought to sponsor South Sudanese anti-government rebels; accused of arbitrary blockage of cross-border trade, of efforts to ransom South Sudan's oil export in order to blackmail Juba into paying high passage fees. Sudan is also suspected of deliberate foot-dragging on the resolution of border disputes; and above all, of intransigence about the implementation of September 2012 cooperation agreements.¹

While these accusations may have some truth to them, the reality is that Khartoum also holds similar views of Juba's position on Sudan's future stability. This has been a great game that has gone on for over a decade since the north-south war ended in 2005, but a risky game that has not benefited any side, one that spells mutual destruction, if not more destructive for South Sudan.² But despite all the suspicion, many South Sudanese diplomats, development specialists, and political realists have never lost sight of the importance of socio-cultural connections between the peoples of the two countries, especially border communities that share livelihoods and long histories of interdependence. These observers, some of them former high-ranking officials of the Sudanese government before the split and who understand the inner workings of Khartoum's power play, point out that the two sides understand the great game but both unquestionably recognize that the two countries need to move past the histories of violence and revitalize these communal relationships in order to forge a future of cooperation. Both sides need to approach their relations with these communal connections as foundation. Both sides need each other, perhaps one needing the other more at different times, but unquestionably interdependent.

People who study the relationship between north and south of the old Sudan do recognize that the memories of the Sudanese state violence, racial and religious bigotry of many northern Sudanese leaders and the anti-north sentiments they have engendered in the south, all of which fueled the drive for the South's separation, remain the lens through which these relations are seen by many South Sudanese today. But to the extent that anyone can remember the old Sudanese adage, that "no one chooses their neighbor," these observers have often talked about the fact that none of the two countries can wish away the

¹ Jok Madut Jok, "Understanding the Addis Ababa Cooperation Agreements Between Sudan and South Sudan." The Sudd Institute, November 17, 2012.

² James Copnall, *A Poisonous Thorn in our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce*. London: Hurst, 2014.

existence of the other, that there is a need to help the two countries to overcome their historical acrimonies, distrust and bad faith negotiation that has always characterized their relationship, and to move into a new era of mutual recognition and respect, so that, together they may create two viable and neighborly countries, peaceful within and between each other.³ It was with this mutual connection in mind that President Kiir's visit was the focus of attention from within South Sudan, as well as in the region and beyond. This weekly review provides a comment on President Kiir's visit, what its aims were and what it accomplished. It reviews the reactions of the South Sudanese, particularly to what President Kiir said in his meeting with Sudan's leader, Omer Hassan al-Bashir. The visit, its perceived significance or lack thereof, were widely debated in South Sudan, in the media, and in discussion forums.

2 The Burden of History as Backdrop to the Visit

When the Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed, ending Africa's longest war and paving the way for South Sudan's secession, the mediators had recognized that the success of this political transition would depend on the leaders of the two Sudans working together to create harmony between and within the two countries. In other words, stability in one country was of vital importance for the stability of the other; economic prosperity in one was linked to a comparable level of prosperity in the other; mutual cooperation was key to national security of each; border trade and movement of people, livestock and goods across the new borders, were all the foundation of a stable new order, a development that would have positive implications for the whole region of Horn, East and Central Africa. Unfortunately, the process that was meant to deliver this positive outlook had left too many issues unsettled, and these issues have since presented themselves as obstacles to a mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries.

There were many agreements that the CPA had put in place to enable the transition from one country to two, from war to cooperation and from competition to mutual dependence. But not only were these measures not implemented, they were actively disregarded, deliberately undermined, and approached by both sides with a win-lose attitude, each expecting the other to crumble first under the weight of the new political and economic dispensation. The long history of acrimony and mistrust was just too much to overcome in the amount of time that it needed. The history of the long wars between north and south of the old Sudan had left a bitter enmity between the two parts and the political leaders in the two countries had difficulties in working through this history. A process to overcome this

³ It was this concern that had led to the formation of the so-called African Union High Implementation Panel under the supervision of the former South African President, Thabo Mbeki. The panel was tasked with the mandate to continue to broker any new agreements and the implementation of outstanding accords. So far, a workable settlement has eluded the panel and so much has remained unclear about the future of the two countries' relationships.

history required involving the Sudanese people on both sides of the new border in this quest, people who actually have to live with each other. For the political leaders, it was a power game; for the ordinary people, it was a life and death issue. President Kiir's visit has set a new stage for rebuilding these connections.

3 What Did the Visit Discuss?

The result of the politico-military approach, instead of economic and livelihoods perspective, the absence of a people-centered approach, is that the two countries have been plagued by internal violence, beset by economic woes, diplomatic challenges and failed peace agreements, both between the two countries and within each. Contested border areas, such as Abyei, remain a thorn in the two countries' relationship. Sudan's civil wars in Darfur, Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile continue to rage on and South Sudan's 4-year old civil war has distracted the two countries from exploring areas of coexistence, cooperation, and mutual benefits of good neighborliness. As a result, the two countries' relations have remained shrouded in mutual mistrust, accusations of sponsorship of each other's efforts to undermine the other and a multitude of suspicions that emanate from the history of battered relations that had caused the split. These have all made it difficult for the two Sudans to move forward together. So far, the leaders in Khartoum and Juba have opted for a combination of lip service to the importance of mutual cooperation; both have used threats, attempted economic wars, with Sudan often blocking border trade and South Sudan still exploring opportunities to ship its oil through East Africa, away from Sudan's Port Sudan. This has not been a healthy relationship, to put it mildly. It has been a damaging politics of brinkmanship. All the while, the border populations have continued to move across the borders as dictated by their lives and livelihoods. Six years since the independence of South Sudan, it appears that the leaders of the two countries have finally come to a realization that this has to change, hence Sudan's active involvement in the search for a resolution to South Sudan's civil war through IGAD and more importantly, the recent two-day visit by the President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir Mayardit, to Khartoum. This visit came at a very crucial and dire moment for both countries.

The Khartoum summit of the two heads of state and the meetings of South Sudan's delegation accompanying the President with their Sudanese counterparts seem to demonstrate an attempt to open a new page of bilateral relations. Were they genuine and straightforward with each other this time, or were the usual games at play? Whatever it may have been, the two sides signed agreements, some on new issues and others as a way to enforce the previously unimplemented ones. The most significant of these agreements are on economic issues, including the resumption of oil production in Unity State and training of South Sudanese technicians in this industry. Border issues were also discussed, including joint security patrols to protect trade and movement of people and goods, the so-called four freedoms. Sudan sought and obtained support from South Sudan to join hands in a campaign to get Sudan's huge foreign debt forgiven. It is unclear, however, how serious are the two countries about the implementation of these pacts, as history of the two countries'

relations does not have a good record of success with regards to genuinely committing to and honoring such agreements.⁴

4 What Did President Kiir Accomplish in Khartoum?

We have to keep in mind that this visit was a response to al-Bashir's invitation, it came at a moment of strength for Khartoum, hence the appearance that Juba simply came with its tail between its legs. On the global stage, Sudan has just won the much anticipated lifting of United States economic sanctions. It has already been praised for its strategic participation in the war against terror, especially its cooperation with regards to the security of the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean corridor. Khartoum has also been the happy recipient of European Union funding that blocks migration through its western territory on the way to Libya, funding which it has diverted much of for its own counter-insurgency efforts in Darfur. Al-Bashir has been the most delighted winner on the African stage, as none of the African countries has been willing to enforce the International Criminal Court's warrant to arrest him for war crimes in Darfur. So, despite many other problems that confront Sudan, including the economic decline, the dwindling foreign currency reserves, and the unending insurgencies, Sudan is now riding a euphoria of renewed acceptance into a community of nations, no longer the pariah it once was. South Sudan, on the other hand, is now a far cry from the enviable place Sudan is now finding itself in internationally.

On bilateral and domestic levels, Sudan also has an upper hand vis-à-vis South Sudan, and that too made President Kiir's visit to Khartoum appear more needed by Juba than being driven by mutual aspirations. Sudan has more or less defeated its insurgencies and no longer seems to need security cooperation with South Sudan. It has sufficiently beaten South Sudan on the question of trade wars, as Khartoum opens and blocks cross-border trade willy-nilly and as it sees it fit to twist the arms of South Sudan. On oil, South Sudan has never been more dependent on continued exports of the crude and Sudan calls the shots on this front, whether on passage fees or on the percentage of revenue Khartoum collects as part of the deal that was reached in 2012 for South Sudan to pay a lump sum of 3 billion US Dollars to narrow the revenue gap that South Sudan's secession had imposed on Sudan. Above all, Sudan has not let a moment pass by without gloating about the close to one million South Sudanese refugees who have streamed into Sudan since 2013, all to an utter sense of humiliation, that the same Sudan they gleefully broke away from has now become their safe haven.⁵ All in all, the meeting in Khartoum, examined realistically, was

⁴ Waakhe Simon Wudu, "South Sudan: President Kiir and Sudanese Counterpart Confer in Khartoum." *African Report on Business*, November 2, 2017.

⁵ This reality has been subject of much dark humor in Sudan about South Sudanese. One joke is that the names of refugee camps for South Sudanese are "Malesh Bashir," or Bashir, we are sorry, or "Raj'atu?" oh, are you back?

not a meeting of equals. It was a mission by an embattled President of South Sudan to cow tow back to a once brutal opponent.

This is not to say that there were no gains from this trip, but to simply suggest that the price South Sudan will pay for these gains might not be a worth-for-worth exchange. President Kiir's visit was aimed at enforcing the 2012 cooperation agreements, which cover border demarcation, oil disputes, citizenship and the final status of the disputed Abyei region, all of which were never implemented due to the intransigence of Khartoum and the plunge of South Sudan into a crisis of its own civil war. To seek their implementation is long overdue, something that many policy experts had suggested be pursued with vigor, but to do it now under duress is what has made the President's visit look like a short-changing of the people of South Sudan.

5 What Do South Sudanese Say about the Visit?

President Kiir has always struggled with public speaking. When he reads a prepared document, he is mechanical and glued to the text, making him incapable of eye contact and in the process losing the command of his audience. But when he veers off of a written speech, he misspeaks, often throwing Arabic words into his English language speech and saying things that his staffers would have hard times clarifying afterwards. In Khartoum, despite what seems to have been a productive visit, with agreements under President's belt, bilateral relations mended to a certain degree and security tensions deescalated, what stuck with South Sudanese was something he said that appeared to have been a slip of the tongue, but which has now entirely overshadowed everything else that could have made his visit a success. Now, instead of celebrating and selling the fruits of his visit to Khartoum, little as this appears to be, to the people of South Sudan, the President's aides have been busy trying to put out the fire from President Kiir's misplaced words. For the people of South Sudan whose everyday existence requires anything positive coming from their leaders to uplift their spirits, even for a day, this is a complete misstep.

In Khartoum, the President is reported to have said something to the effect that “the fact that South Sudan broke away from Sudan was not really the most choice of everybody, but when the majority decide in a democratic situation, people have to go with it.” There was a voice recording of this speech and what the President said was not very clear, making it subject to all manner of interpretation.⁶ Some said the President had expressed regret for the South Sudanese decision to vote for separation, which the President's aides have since scuffed at, saying that it is not what he meant. Others have interpreted it to mean that he was speaking in acknowledgement of the small percentage of South Sudanese (1.2%) who voted for unity with Sudan and who should now be a bridge in a new era of required coexistence. This seems to be coherent with the quoted text above. Still, whatever it was the

⁶ Sudan Tribune, “South Sudan president regrets secession from Khartoum.”

President had meant to say, the overwhelming vote in favor of separation was an emotive issue for South Sudanese and the President needed not bring it up during this visit, a state visit that stood out to the citizens of South Sudan as part of an effort to position their new country as an equal with any other country, seeking mutually beneficial diplomatic relations, and not cowing to any other nation. Many South Sudanese even used this statement as the only lens with which to look at the agreements the President signed in Khartoum, suggesting that these agreements carry very little long-term benefits for South Sudan and mark the mortgaging off of South Sudan's resources to Sudan in exchange for miniscule short-term gains.

In sum, President Kiir's visit to Khartoum, a response to President al-Bashir's invitation, came at a moment of desperation in South Sudan, and as such, was not optimum in terms of its gains for South Sudan. In view of the agreements the President signed, it is clear that Sudan simply handed over a prepared document to South Sudanese for signature, with terms that are more beneficial to Khartoum. This was a result of the upper hand that Khartoum had in terms of global weight and the weakness of South Sudan in terms of near collapse of the state. In other words, South Sudan had zero leverage in the negotiations, for what else was President Kiir giving Khartoum in exchange, other than oil reserves, commitment to border security so that Khartoum takes advantage of South Sudan, the biggest market for its manufactured goods? It was a meeting without the balance of power and was bound to favor Sudan in the end. While mutual cooperation, harmonious relations and respect for each other's existence are important for both countries, the agreements forged this time favor Khartoum more than they favor Juba.

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

Jok Madut Jok is a cofounder of the Sudd Institute and its Executive Director. 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.