



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

December 1, 2020

The South Sudan National Dialogue: What Next?

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I. Introduction

On December 14, 2016, South Sudan's President, Salva Kiir Mayardit, declared the National Dialogue (ND) process and appointed eminent personalities and civil society representatives to lead it. At the time, the second spell of the civil conflict was raging in parts of Upper Nile, Equatoria, and Bahr el Ghazal regions. Numerous attempts by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to salvage the 2015 Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) proved unsuccessful. Likewise, communal conflicts were driving widespread political violence. While the efforts to revitalize the ARCSS were underway, the framers of the ND realized that an elite driven process presented very limited prospects for stability in the country. In such a context, a "people centered" political process seemed more promising. Thus, the principal objective of the ND was to engender sustainable peace and establish national unity in reflection of people's voices. In his ND declaration speech, President Kiir referenced the ARCSS and the SPLM reunification agreement as an effort in the right direction but cautioned that 'there remain a number of fundamental issues that require a much broader South Sudanese forum.' He declared that 'political settlements have often ignored longstanding grassroots grievances,' necessitating the institution of the ND.

After nearly 4 years, the ND finally concluded on November 17, 2020, offering broadly appreciated recommendations on a range of state formation and national building matters in South Sudan. This Review, therefore, analyzes the ND by revisiting its merits and public reaction, assessing its achievements, and situating its recommendations in the policy parameters and cultural perspectives of South Sudan.

II. The National Dialogue merits and public reactions

As outlined above, President Kiir announced the ND as a critical complement to the peace process that was struggling to deliver results¹. Accordingly, the ND intended to establish an encompassing platform for the nation to conduct an internal reflection,

¹ <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-national-dialogue-initiative-in-south-sudan/>

enabling the South Sudanese citizenry—both at home and abroad—to voice their diverse views on issues of security restoration and state formation.

Predictably, there was a mixed reaction to the President’s announcement of the ND. Supporters of the initiative commended the President for introducing a program that places people at the center of nation healing and statecraft. After 2010, when South Sudan last conducted elections, the citizens have not participated much in public matters, feeling completely disconnected from their government. The citizens who felt this way welcome the ND, bracing for what they considered an uncharacteristic of yet appreciable path to participatory democracy. On the other hand, critics saw President Kiir’s announcement as a distraction from the 2015 peace accord, which had essentially collapsed in July 2016. The declaration, many pessimists noted, amounted to “forum shopping,” a political overture. For this group, the ND process, being a political project of a president who is part of the conflict, would hardly be objective. It would also be exclusive, they claimed, losing credibility and legitimacy.

The major criticism was that the government, especially the NSS, would interfere with the process. With an increasingly narrowing political space at the time, the view of this group was that the delegates would be intimidated and silenced, turning the process into a pro-government monologue. The SPLM-IO, the main opposition, held out of the process, objecting to participation due to lack of pre-dialogue consultations with a broad spectrum of the South Sudanese political establishment. Dr. Lam Akol, a prominent South Sudanese politician, accused President Kiir of being the least qualified to call for or lead the ND process due to his direct involvement in the conflict². Although the President did little consultation with his political opponents before establishing the ND, the National Dialogue Steering Committee (NDSC) embarked upon a series of consultations with political groups that included the SPLM-IO’s Dr. Riek Machar, Dr. Lam Akol, and SPLM Leaders (Political Detainees). Critics also argued that President Kiir’s policies, many of them well-intended, rarely achieve their desired objectives owing to the absence of political will. Several earlier projects, including dura investment, 1000 tractors, 30 national schools, and the Letter of Credit (LCs), are often cited as failures.

Amidst these doubts, President Kiir ploughed ahead, assuring the nation and international community that the process would be credible, genuine, and reliable, subsequently stepping down as the patron of the NDSC³. He went on to open the ND and the process gained a modicum of openness and independence. That delegates would speak their minds freely and propose ways to resolve intractable problems facing South Sudan speaks volume about this process. The government would not be involved as initially alleged and allowed an independent NDSC⁴ to handle the process. Some of those

² <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/kiir-not-qualified-to-initiate-national-dialogue-says-lam-akol>

³ Vhumbunu, 2018. The National Dialogue Initiative in South Sudan. ACCORD.

⁴ Your government will guarantee safety and freedom of all the actors who are going to participate in the National Dialogue, including those who are currently out of the country, some or whom are opposed to the government.

who initially held out (i.e., members from SSOA members and SPLM Leaders) eventually joined the process.

III. Notable achievements of the National Dialogue

In 2017, the ND's consultation process kicked off, lasting about 4 years. Grassroots consultations involved citizens at subnational levels, those internally displaced, and those living in refugee camps. The regional conferences followed, drawing delegates from the former regions of Bahr el Ghazal, Equatoria, and Upper Nile. The last strand of the ND process, the national conference, concluded on the 17th of November 2020. In all of these conferences and consultations, people and communities spoke their minds about how to fix an ailing country. A plethora of official reports resulting from this process, many of them not so kind to the current leaders, have been widely disseminated. When the ND's Co-Chair, Angelo Beda, opened the national conference by sharing people's views across the country, his speech rattled a handful of folks in the SPLM. Co-Chair Beda courageously decreed: "The people at the grassroots blame the crisis in the country, on the failure of leadership. Particularly under the ruling party; the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. When we reference SPLM, we are talking about the SPLM before it broke into numerous factions as we know today. You cannot say you are IO, you are not part of it. You cannot say you are FD, you are not part of it. You cannot say you are SSOA, you are also part of it."

Nevertheless, these sorts of indictments did not distract the Kiir Administration; the President provided the NDSC necessary resources to conduct the process, insulating it from interference from his colleagues. The ND, it eventually turned out, was transparent, reliable, and free of any/almost all interference, proving the skepticism of many citizens to be misplaced. This surprising observation is shared by many, both from within the country and outside. In short, the ND achieved its objectives amidst so many intervening obstacles. It concluded with a number of resolutions on governance, economy, security, and social cohesion. But will these be implemented?

There is a commonly shared belief that South Sudan is in its dire condition because of major problems of governance. To this end, the Conference adopted a host of resolutions, including instituting a federal system that empowers states and limits federal authority; limiting presidential powers and adopting a 2-term limits for 5 years each; ensuring independence among parliament, executive, and judiciary; and conducting credible elections as a way to transfer power, among others. The challenge of South Sudan's over-dependence on oil was also addressed. In an institutionally barren environment such as South Sudan, dependence on oil comes with terrible consequences, including rent seeking and Dutch disease⁵. Revenues, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict⁶, have

⁵ Dutch disease is a term that broadly refers to the harmful consequences of large increases in a country's income. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/basics/dutch.htm>.

⁶ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2020/11/16/Republic-of-South-Sudan-Request-for-Disbursement-Under-the-Rapid-Credit-Facility-Press-49895>

shrunk to their lowest in recent periods, inducing fiscal stresses for the FY2019/2020⁷. Thus, the Conference urged the Government to strengthen the National Revenue Authority (NRA); modernize the mining sector; and improve governance, anti-corruption frameworks, and environmental protection, among others.

A desire for political stability trumps all else. The Conference called upon the peace partners to end all forms of hostilities and use peaceful means to resolve their grievances. It urged the transformation of the security sector, including instituting a merit-based recruitment process. Finally, because of many years of wars and conflicts, people's social fabrics have been shattered. The Conference, therefore, resolved to rebuild these ties through healing and reconciliation processes.

IV. Policy implementation

To ensure the ND's resolutions are implemented, the Conference resolved to establish a Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC). This Committee is expected to conduct follow-ups on the implementation processes and guide both the President and the national parliament on key milestones of the ND. While the process has served as an important input into the transitional process in the country, there remains a doubt about the national leaders' readiness to fully implement these resolutions. This doubt does not come as a surprise. South Sudan's policy environment is fraught with many disappointing policy experiences. That said, the current government benefits from the widely recognized success of the first phase of the ND process. This can now be built upon, starting with gradually implementing key resolutions on governance, security, and economy. And like the ND process, the implementation of the resolutions ought to be transparent and inclusive. In particular, the President should take another bold step and establish an independent implementation Committee. The National Dialogue Resolutions Implementation Committee (NDRIC), with most of its members drawn from the NDSC, could go a long way in pushing for the ND's resolutions. The MEC would then be housed within the NDRIC. Finally, the President should reach out to the holdout politicians and bring them on board. Doing so enables greater consensus, credibility, and legitimacy, bolstering the ND's success and impact, going forward.

About the 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

⁷ Garang, J., 2020. Limitations of COVID-19 Pandemic Containment Measures in Fragile Contexts: The Case of South Sudan. IMF.

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