



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

P. O. Box 34, Juba, South Sudan • Tel: +211 (0)956 305 780

Email: thesudd.institute@gmail.com • www.suddinstitute.org

Weekly Review

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Clearing the Dimming Vision of the Liberation of South Sudan: Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of Independence

Francis Mading Deng

Summary

This review is based on the author's presentation to the Roundtable convened by UNMISS in Juba on the 6-7 July 2021, to Commemorate the 10th Anniversary of South Sudan's independence. The remarks and views reflected in the review are the author's and not to be attributed to UNMISS or the Sudd Institute.

The Challenge in Context

Shortly after independence, South Sudan was plunged into a civil war that has intermittently devastated the country ever since. Though essentially a struggle for power between and among individual leaders of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLM/SPLA), which had championed the struggle since its inception in 1983, the war soon began to be perceived as an ethnic conflict that primarily pitted the Dinka and the Nuer against each other. Since then, the people of South Sudan who had been fighting and sacrificing for the ideals of freedom, equality, dignity, and prosperity have been reduced to a nation massively displaced internally or forced into refuge in the neighboring countries or dispersed as refugees in many countries around the world.

As President Salva Kiir Mayardit said in a meeting of the Leadership of the ruling SPLM, at independence, South Sudanese were a proud people who held their heads high and were widely respected the world over. Now, they are no longer proud or respected. Devastated by pervasive internecine violence throughout the country with severe humanitarian consequences in areas of vital necessities, they now bend their heads low in humiliation and in desperate need for international assistance. "Why have we done this to our people?", the President asked rhetorically.

In this review, I contextualize my observations by highlighting three main issues. The first issue is that major developments in South Sudan during and after the liberation struggle have been

a process of a dynamic interplay between internal and external forces. The second is that the crises the country has faced since independence have emerged as a result of power struggle between and among the leaders and their associates at the national level, with the relative neglect of the rest of the country.

My last point is that the policy synthesis of these two factors calls for collaborative efforts with the country's international partners in responding to the underlying challenges, both at national and local levels.

The Turbulent Road to Independence

In order to fully appreciate the value of independence, it is important to recall the challenges that propelled the liberation war, the difficulties that had to be overcome in the process leading to the exercise of self-determination, and the support many friends and people of goodwill from the international community rendered to help make independence possible. South Sudanese fought against discrimination, domination, marginalization and humiliation imposed on them by an identity crisis which had two dimensions. The first dimension was that the ruling Arab-Islamic minority, though an African-Arab hybrid, misidentified itself as monolithically Arab. The second was that this distorted self-identification by an ethnic minority was imposed on a country of immense racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, which was then defined as Arab, with implications that relegated non-Arabs, particularly Southerners, to a lower-class citizenship, with implicit gross inequalities. All attempts by the South to foster a framework of inclusivity and equality by postulating a vision of New Sudan failed, which made the demand for self-determination with the objective of secession imperative. Nonetheless, we must recall that there was a very strong opposition to the exercise of self-determination and specially to the principle of South Sudanese independence.

Such opposition to self-determination with the prospects of secession came from many quarters inside and outside Africa. These include prominent leaders in the African Union and the United Nations. Even our friends did not like to see the Sudan divided. I was a strong supporter of self-determination not so much to divide the country, but as a pressure on the government of the Sudan to create conditions for consensual unity.

I recall a discussion I had with Former President Jimmy Carter who opposed the independence of South Sudan, saying that no one wanted the Sudan divided. My argument was that even if unity was the desired option, to say that no one wanted separation was to remove the pressure in support of unity. I was honored to co-chair the Task Force that was set up by the Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS, to develop an advisory paper on US Policy to End the War in the Sudan.

I was the only Sudanese among the fifty to sixty members with interest and expertise on the Sudan; and all of them except me were opposed to the right of self-determination and the prospects for Southern Sudan independence. They even argued that the United States had no strategic interests in the Sudan and that the only significance of the Sudan was its involvement

in international terrorism, destabilization of the region, and humanitarian crisis in the country. They wanted support for the peace process in the Sudan to be left to European allies, with remote support from the United States. They also argued against any mediation that would support the prospects of separation by the South.

Playing my cards discreetly to moderate my obviously biased self-interest, I argued that contrary to what they said, Sudan was a country of great strategic importance, being a meeting point of Sub-Saharan and North Africa and of races, religions and cultures, with potentials for reconciliation or confrontation that could have ripple effects for the Middle East.

Sudan's involvement in international terrorism was due to the war in which the Arab-Muslim North reacted against Western Christian support for the South, which made them join hands with the Middle Eastern Muslim terrorists, on the principle that the enemies of my enemies are my friends. The same was true of the destabilization of the region which was again a reaction to African support for the South. And obviously, the humanitarian crisis was a direct consequence of the war.

The obvious policy implication was that by ending the war, involvement with terrorism would stop, destabilizing the region would cease, and humanitarian crisis would commensurately end. I argued that the United States, as the sole superpower, could not be disinterested in a country of such global strategic location and potentials in both positive and negative ramifications.

As for the risk of partition, I argued that the best way to safeguard the unity of the country was not to declare opposition to unity, but to stress the potential threat of partition, if conditions for unity were not attractive. To avoid partitioning the country, I suggested that we had to make possible the impossible by reconciling the irreconcilable and proposing the formula of 'One Country, Two Systems', so that the North could pursue their Arab-Islamic agenda while the South followed its African secular agenda.

As we know, the US eventually played a pivotal, mediating role in the peace process on the basis of the formula of 'One Country, Two Systems' during the interim period. Meanwhile, the right of self-determination with the option of secession for the South had to be affirmed as a credible threat to the leadership that they must create the appropriate conditions for sustaining unity or expect the South to opt for secession.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy After Independence

The reason for the opposition to Southern secession was not only because it was feared that breaking up the country would set a bad example for Africa, but that an independent South Sudan would be torn apart by ethnic violence, be a failed state, collapse and be a serious security risk for the region and internationally.

My response to that argument was that we needed to know whether the sources of the crises that would result in state failure or collapse were going to be internal or externally generated

so that we should prepare for appropriate responses. It turned out that some of those who raised those concerns were paradoxically working to promote the very crises they were warning about.

When I explained all this to our national leaders, the response was a categorical assertion that we would not collapse or be a failed state. In response, I advised against complacency and stressed that we must prove the prophets of doom wrong every day. Tragically, what was feared by those who opposed our independence is what has happened, and for some, it was a self-fulfilling prophecy to which they themselves contributed.

The country has since confronted a myriad of crises and failures that run counter to the ideals and aspirations for which the people of South Sudan struggled and sacrificed for decades. Our people fought for a Vision of a New Sudan of full equality of citizenship and shared human dignity without any discrimination on grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, culture and gender.

Conflicts of identity do not emanate from mere differences, but from the manner in which differences are managed to generate inequality, real or perceived, to a degree unacceptable to the disadvantaged. Although our crisis of national identity with Khartoum was severe because of the sharp racial, religious, and cultural differences and the gross discrimination associated with those differences, identity is relative, and conflicts can result from differences that may not be so striking. Given as an example, Somalia, which is one of the most homogeneous countries in the world, has been torn apart by clan differences.

We in South Sudan are being torn apart by ethnic differences and discrimination or inequalities, real or perceived. In almost every country with diversities of various forms and degrees, there are often elements of inequality. National leaders are, therefore, called upon to repeatedly renew their commitment to policies and measures aimed at promoting inclusivity and equality. South Sudan is no exception. Indeed, we are experiencing elements of what we struggled against, a system in which citizens were divided and stratified on the basis of identity. This is unsustainable.

The Disappointment of a Betrayed Liberation

Many of us in varying ways, means and degrees, took part in the liberation struggle and were very proud and gratified when independence was achieved, but are now deeply disappointed by the way our performance has betrayed the dreams and aspirations of the struggle. Our friends, international partners and all men and women of goodwill from around the world, who helped us achieve that glorious goal and shared our joy of having liberated our people and country, are now also deeply disappointed by our men-made post-independence crises and failures.

Those who might have contributed to our demise probably now realize that these crises have no borders and that we are in this together. In a book I published after the partition, *Bound by Conflict: The Dilemmas of the Two Sudans*, I argued that unity and separation are degrees of on-

going relations that could be weakened or strengthened, depending on the will of the people and their leaders.

I also argued in that book that though the two countries were now separate, they were still bound together by conflicts in which they each supported militias and rebels from both sides. I said that they needed to cooperate with each other to end their internal wars and stop being Bound by Conflicts to being Bonded by Solutions, which has been happening over the last few years.

Partnership in Pursuit of a Shared Goal

As we now endeavor to restore peace, security and stability in our country through the credible implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, we must be both inward and outward oriented. Inwardly, we must urgently move beyond focusing on Chapters One and Two of the Revitalized Agreement that deal primarily with power sharing and security arrangements.

In this regard, we should recognize that the Revitalized Peace Agreement and the National Dialogue are complementary processes, one internationally initiated and conducted from the top involving the elites and focusing on power sharing, and the other by definition nationally owned and involving the views of the people at all levels throughout the country and covering all substantive areas of concern. Even those opposition parties who were initially not involved in the National Dialogue ought to recognize that the issues covered were nonpartisan and were of interest to all the people of the country. The Revitalized Agreement has the leverage of regional and international support; National Dialogue has the authenticity, integrity, and legitimacy of the will of the people.

We must prioritize taking peace to the countryside to end inter-communal violence, ensure the security of the rural areas, encourage our people to return to their villages, give them essential services, tools and basic support for them to build their homes and cultivate their food and generate self-reliant development. What I am calling for here is to revitalize, to use a now popular term, the strategic objectives of the Liberation Movement to prioritize farming and use oil to fuel economic growth through increased investment in agriculture, to take town to the villages, and to build physical infrastructure.

Looking outwards, we must engage our friends and partners in a candid, constructive dialogue, to explore a common ground and join hands in working together toward the goals we share, instead of acrimonious confrontations that only weaken our efforts and render us less effective in achieving our shared goals.

In this connection, we must remember that sovereignty can no longer be used as a barricade against international involvement in internal affairs of a country but should rather be seen as a concept of State responsibility to protect and assist its population, to ensure their physical safety and respect for their human rights and dignity, and provide for their basic needs, with the support of international friends and partners, if necessary.

If a state manifestly fails to discharge its national responsibility with the result that its people suffer in large numbers, the world will not stand by and watch without some form of intervention. The best way to protect sovereignty is to discharge the responsibilities of sovereignty and to ask for help from international friends and partners, if needed.

To our friends and partners, we say that being in need makes one vulnerable and particularly sensitive to humiliation and insult, which means that constructive and productive partnership requires deferential attitude and avoiding offensive ways of delivering messages. Often, the problem with a tough message is not so much in what is said, but in how it is said. This is particularly important to note in the African context. More specifically, a productive engagement with South Sudanese demands candid, non-acrimonious, constructive dialogue on how to manage the situation and pave the way forward to achieve our shared goal for durable peace, security, stability and prosperity.

The Promise of Strategic Optimism

Finally, pessimism and despair cannot be options in confronting the crises. Well-grounded strategic optimism must be the only way forward. Such post-independence crises, as the ones now facing South Sudan, are common to most countries emerging from foreign domination and the challenge is the ability to overcome them.

Optimism is more assuring than hope. While hope entails waiting passively for the action of others, often associated with the benevolence of Divine Intervention, optimism implies tangible action with reasonably predictable outcomes. Hope is wishful thinking; optimism is promising action, done, planned or perceived. Optimism does not rule out risks, obstacles and even setbacks, but rests on determination, persistence, and creative search for alternative means.

As the saying goes, the real challenge in life is not to avoid falling, for that may be nigh impossible, but the determination and the ability to get up and march on after falling. In the process of falling, getting up, and marching on, we need our friends and partners who supported our independence and have stood with us through thick and thin in managing the challenges of our post-independence crises.

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.

About the Author

Francis M. Deng has recently been assigned the position of South Sudan's Roving Ambassador after having been the country's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Prior to that, he served for five years as the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide at the level of Under-Secretary-General. From 1992 to 2004, he served as Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons. His first position in the United Nations was that of Human Rights Officer in the Secretariat from 1967 to 1972 when he was appointed Sudan's Ambassador to the Nordic Countries. He was also Sudan's Ambassador to Canada and the United States of America and was also Minister of State for Foreign Affairs for five years. After leaving his Government's service, he held a series of positions in leading think tanks and universities in the United States. Dr. Deng graduated with an LLB (honors) from the University of Khartoum to which he was appointed member of the Law Faculty and then sent abroad for post-graduate studies. He holds an LLM and a JSD from Yale University Law School. Dr. Deng has authored and edited over thirty books in a wide variety of fields and has written two novels on the crisis of national identity in the Sudan.