



South Sudan Conflict: The Seed of Unresolved Problems

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The secession of the Republic of South Sudan from the larger Sudan caused a lot of jubilation to the people of South Sudan, and hope to the region. While the jubilation of the Southerners was greatly informed by the prospect of their self-determination that would be marked by equity in the distribution of resources, the hope of many across Africa was the end of the protracted North-South war. The question in many people's minds is whether the 98.3% vote towards secession was a vote in the right direction. Was "the birth of the nation" unviable as some have argued? Is Sudan behind the current unease to advance the notion of the South's "unviability" as a state? Indeed there are some who find it surprising that the Nation has so far lasted without serious internal wrangles given the ethnic divisions that pre-existed her and the hostilities between the North and the south. To such proponents, the current events are unsurprising. With all such complexities, the analysis of the current unrest becomes murky as one tries to unravel the cause(s). Yet it had been hoped that the making of the nation of South Sudan would draw lessons from the formation of nation-states in Africa in the middle of the previous century and therefore avert the many mistakes that these early nations made in the attempt at self-determination.

There were a number of unsolicited pieces of advice to the makers of the young nation as to how they should have progressed in order to ensure sustainable growth and unity in the nation. We find Dr Sara Pantuliano's *South Sudan: A Nation in the Making* that was published in The Guardian of July 8th 2011 one such relevant contribution with the current turn of events. It is worth noting that the article was published a day before the referendum that ushered in the new nation. The article laid bare the challenges that the young nation would be facing a day after the article was published. For instance, Pantuliano foresaw, alongside many others, the unresolved issues of border demarcation in *Abyei and Southern Kordofan* areas and the sharing of resources – oil and water – as the potential trouble causers. As nations that have just come out of war often encounter, revenue consumption by the normally convoluted army, in this case the SPLA/SPLM, were to pose equally formidable challenges to the economic growth of the nation. Pantuliano therefore called for

¹ Dr Sara Pantuliano, "South Sudan: a nation in the making" *The Guardian on Poverty Matters Blog*, of 8th July 2011.
<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/jul/08/south-sudan-independence>

“considerable” political courage for the government of South Sudan to shed off its soldiers and to usher in a civilized police force that would effectively deal with insecurity. Regress to autocracy was another threat that was raised by Pantuliano. This, in her argument, was possible given Africa’s history where liberation movements have turned out to be autocratic after assuming the instruments of power. Was anything done to mitigate these possible threats?

What comes out from the ongoing unrest is that none of the aforementioned issues were decisively addressed. There are two narratives as to what sparked the unrest: one, from the ruling group claims that Riek Machar’s side attempted to topple the sitting president. However this is disputed by Machar’s side who claim that a selective disarmament of the Nuer soldiers was the cause of the fiasco. Either of the narrations point to deep seated issues that have not been addressed. The unrest is definitely between two major warring communities, the Dinka versus the Nuer. Even though the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in 2007 brought to an end Africa’s longest-running war between the North and South Sudan, it created new motives and opportunities for violence among these communities in South Sudan. The aforementioned duo narratives are therefore mere proximate causes used to ignite a conflict caused by deep seated issues that have not been addressed.

Exclusion of the Nuer by Kiir’s side may therefore be seen to underlie the current South Sudan conflict. This longest-running conflict seems, at least according to the non-Dinka to have been entrenched by the Kiir’s government. Such exclusive policy has ignited a feeling of marginalization and oppression among the non-Dinkas. In attempts to galvanize support and change the status quo, Machar turned to his network of supporters, especially the Nuer ethnic group to try to reclaim power through an armed rebellion. Such resolves are not new in South even before the South became autonomous. Rather it is the common enemy – The North – kept it from exploding. It is an open secret that there are some of the non-Dinka communities that feel left out in the whole nation-building exercise and that seriously find themselves at the margins of socio-economic development despite South Sudan’s high GDP per capita.

Yet even the best attempt at internal integration may not have been enough for the case of South Sudan given her relationship with the North. It was foolhardy to assume that the establishment of the Republic of SS was the end of the North-South conflict. Overall, it is evident that the newest state did not learn from the older states in their attempt at nation-building. There seems to be a poor attempt at creating an integrating ideology that could legitimize and justify a “national” self-interpretation of the respective community. Neither can we trace an attempt at creating an integrated society with an identity that the majority of the people can identify themselves with. The state of the South’s poverty is quite serious despite the recent efforts at addressing it; it stems from decades of neglect. But there is a

great deal of work that the new administration ought to have done to equitably empower the citizens.

That the unrest came few months after President Kiir sacked his deputy and ministers allied to him points to a lack of political foresight from the president's side that did not deal decisively with integration matters. It is fundamental that integration cuts across all the spheres of the citizenry (social, economic and political) in a way that makes them have a sense of belonging to the nation-state. The new nation of South Sudan failed to create an integrated society in which the grievances of various disconcerted groups could be addressed. This phenomenon has been witnessed in political development of most countries such as South Sudan transiting from war to a democratic system. In Africa, the same was experienced in Liberia when violent riots became the norm in the streets of Monrovia in 2004. Other countries that experienced a similar situation include Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sierra Leone. Though the path towards democracy has often turned violent, the violence of the extent witnessed in South Sudan is due to prospects for violent conflicts often created by a flawed and ill-managed transitional process. Extensive body of scholarly works on transitional processes by Roland Paris, Robert Dahl and Jack Snyder assert that such processes of democratization aggravate instability by creating new grievances, which in turn increase risks of escalation of violence.

Underlying, therefore, the conflict in South Sudan is a struggle for power and control. Effectively, a deep-seated fear, distrust and uncertainty among the ruling elites continue to threaten peace. The opposition represented by Machar disgruntled by the Dinka dominated SPLM/SPLA government gradually developed a sense of desperation, marginalization and oppression by the government's failure to meet the desires and expectations of its constituency. These unfulfilled expectations have their origin in the July independence and experience of self-determination. It is worth noting that such defining moments often causes unprecedented levels of expectation likely to create motives for violence. Such situations are well explained by the theory on relative deprivation. Relative deprivation refers to situations where people feel discontented after comparing themselves with other groups that seem to enjoy more what they believe themselves to be entitled to. Feelings arising from suchlike situations have been cited as a potential cause of violence such as civil war and political violence. When people like the Nuer begin to feel deprived of participation and benefits from the national resources, they can easily resort to violence as a practical means of expressing their grievances.

We, therefore, make the case that the conflict in South Sudan is a product of unresolved issue closely as well as systematized politics of exclusion. This kind of politics seems to have reinforced a strong sense of deprivation among the marginalized factions of the political divide. Addressing such politically polarized societies requires equal distribution of resources and opportunities. These initiatives are crucial for enhancing national cohesion and integration. It is therefore our considered view that for the ongoing talks to establish a

durable peace, they must emphasize the importance of an inclusive government in the still maturing young nation of South Sudan. An inclusive government, particularly for South Sudan, still dealing with the effects of the recent unrest, may mean a power-sharing government comprising of violence-makers and other marginalized groups. Also significant for consideration in the ongoing talks is the need for political means to address poverty, inequality, unemployment (particularly among the youth) and consolidation of national unity. A full integration of the disjointed and demarcated army into the national army is crucial for the sustainability of peace. Serious consideration on how to address such issues would be helpful in preventing prospects for violence.

Lastly, for South Sudan to mature as a nation, it must incorporate through its path to democracy and nation-building the urgency to establish strong institutions necessary to structure a durable peace. IGAD and parties involved in the ongoing talks must deliberate reasonable guidelines on how to create such institutions. One immediate way could be to consider establishing power-sharing institutions with clear guidelines on separations of power. Having a multiple set of power sharing institutions may guarantee even the most insecure factions within the nation some sense of security. The same would also enable various ethnic groups and political factions to interact in a mutually reinforcing manner likely to bring on board concerns of different ethnic groups. Involving the Southerners in designing such institutions would help them commit to setting institutions that they can willingly respect. Such approach may equally inspire all parties to the conflict to collectively participate in laying strong foundations for building an enduring peace.

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