South Sudan: Easy Diagnosis and Hard Prescription
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The current crisis in South Sudan cannot be fully understood without a cursory review of historical events beginning in 1983. That was the year when General Jafaar Mohamed Nimeiry, leader of the socialist May Revolution (25th May 1969), having abandoned his socialist path, quashed the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which had ended the Anyanya civil war and established a “Regional Government” for the entire territory known as South Sudan. Instead of the one region, the South was divided into three regions, Bahr el Ghazal, Equatoria, and Upper Nile. Nimeiry added salt to the wounded feelings of Southern Sudanese by introducing Sharia Law for all of Sudan, prodded to do this by the late Hassan Turabi, mastermind of the National Islamic Front.

Resentment to the 1972 agreement was first expressed by a group who called themselves Anyanya II (Anyanya I being the war that was ended by the agreement in 1972) who demanded nothing short of independence for South Sudan. John Garang himself had expressed displeasure with the Addis Ababa Agreement. Prominent among these early Anyanya II were leaders such as Gai Tut – a Nuer. When John Garang formed the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLA) in 1983, he followed quickly by eliminating competition for leadership through a bloody confrontation with GaiTut’sAnyanya II. This emergence of a new war was complicated by a general allegation among Dinkas (Garang’s ethnic group) that the abolition of the Addis Ababa Agreement by Nimeiry was done at the behest of Equatorians who allegedly resented Dinka domination in the Regional Government of South Sudan. Thus, as the SPLA grew, it was largely seen as a Dinka establishment, though its history will show that, in fact, there was a significant ethnic variation in the composition of the SPLA under an equally significant Dinka-dominated leadership with Garang at the apex. This has largely been the case to date where the said ethnic group has dominated the government leadership. In an already ethnically polarized country, this underlying factor has and can be noted in every aspect of organization in South Sudan.

It needs be borne in mind that morale-boosting sermons of John Garang to his soldiers regrettably contained repeated statements, which drew subjective red lines between SPLA and all others. Simple illiterate rank and file soldiers exposed to little else outside cattle-herding were told that on achieving success, they would be the rulers of South Sudan. Such calibre of soldiers has dominated either sides of repeated conflict in South Sudan shining the spotlight on the need to have a professional army. It is clear that not only is the country dealing with a poorly trained army, but also one that is ethnically divided. Garang demonstrated his commitment unprofessionalism by promoting individuals with little or no formal education to high ranks within the SPLA – with devastating consequences for the rule of law in the post Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA, 2005) governance of South Sudan.

Further complicating this ethnic-based understanding of “revolution” was the unfortunate history of the “Big Man” syndrome in South Sudan. It can categorically be stated here that both colonial and post-independence history of both Sudan and then South Sudan trashed the principles of the rule of law, conveniently substituting it for Rule by Man. Governance had always been by orders from above, rarely, if ever, by decisions of relevant institutions up and down the structure of governance. It would therefore come as very strange to President Salva Kiir and his followers that anyone could question the President, or the Minister within his Ministry, or the Commissioner within his County on any matter of policy, administration, or even within political parties. It is indeed quite rare to find leaders developed outside the big
man syndrome. A second challenge associated with the big man syndrome is that though the president rules by decrees, the officials who have posed themselves around him influence decisions most of the time. Emphasis can be placed on groups such as the Jieng council of elders who have positioned themselves to have the ear of the president. However, the agenda they are advancing can be easily viewed as tribal domination.

It is in the above context that one could minimally understand the crises that took place within the SPLM in the period preceding the outbreak of the recent conflict in 2013. It was abundantly clear for those who had hoped that the independence of South Sudan would bring about changes anchored in the democratic governance of South Sudan were dreaming. President Kiir continued to rule by decree, including replacing elected governors of some states at will, and totally ignoring constitutional provisions governing the removal or replacement of governors. It was equally clear that this would be the style Mr. Kiir would use within the party – the supposed hatchery for South Sudanese democrats. The straw that broke the camel’s back consisted of series of confrontations within the Political Bureau of the SPLM where those who leaned toward democracy wanted to participate in the determination of the agenda, and demanded that the appropriate form for decision making should be by secret ballot. Kiir and his staunch followers objected to this, resulting in a boycott of a meeting by those making these pro-democracy demands. Following this, the so-named group of ten (10) and others were considered coup-plotters and asked to report to police stations over this party affair.

The hawks in Kiir’s Camp, leading among them, Paul Malong, Chief of Staff, began to make deployment and disarmament manoeuvres within the army, an action resisted by some who saw elements of the Dinka within the SPLA taking advantage – and that is how a fight broke out between them in December 2015. As it turned out, those who resisted what they saw as pro-Kiir-Dinka advantage within the army where largely Nuer of Vice-President’s (Riak Machar) group. It was an easy transition, speculative though it might be, to associate the outbreak of bloody hostilities within the SPLA as lead by Kiir and Riak. It is absolute common sense that had Riak not run for his life; he would have been murdered in his house in Juba. That he would become the leader of those opposed to Kiir’s rule was a logical outcome.

It is this context of mutual suspicion that has enlarged the understanding of the war as a conflict between Dinka and Nuer. That is true to an extent, but does not explain all without regard to the history that has brought these attitudes about. Complicating that situation is an unwillingness to feel remorse, an enduring hatred of these others, expanded to include other ethnic groups. The failure of leadership due to a focus on the big man syndrome, coupled with a lack of Homo sapiens traits, has created a rich pasture for big man cultivators such as the Chief of General Staff, and the Minister of Information, compulsive enemies to compromise.

What is the way forward? The way forward would have been the recent Agreement on the Recent Conflict in South Sudan (August 2015) – unfortunately, Kiir’s wing of supporters in South Sudan actually have no interest whatsoever in implementing this agreement, brilliant though it is. The agreement, which Kiir has on a number of occasions claimed that he signed under duress, offered a plausible way forward for South Sudan. Comprehensive focus was placed on reformation of institutions such as the security providers; therefore, laying groundwork for security sector reforms. However, it is also clear that the agreement is dangerously nearing its failure to achieve its purpose following the move to replace Riek Machar as First Deputy Vice-President with Taban Deng Gai on 25th July 2016. Hence, there is not much road-way outside a UN-Trusteeship lasting at least 5 years, time enough to put in all the institutions, laws, and regulations that constitute the essential architecture for democratic governance of
South Sudan, marking a historical new beginning. How to establish such a trusteeship is another subject for another occasion.

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