

The Tragedy of South Sudan - The Way Forward

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South Sudan, the newest African state began to descend in mid-December last year into deadly political violence with devastating human cost. Credible reports indicate that the killing was largely ethnically driven. Recent figures estimate that tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives, and 1.8 million people have been displaced over the past eight months, some 100, 000 people are now sheltering in United Nations bases mostly from the Nuer ethnic group; 400,000 have fled across the borders to Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan and Kenya; and nearly half the population - 4.9 million people need humanitarian aid. These reports of killings and displacements paint a frightening picture of possible widespread communal violence which might lead to the demise of the fragile state.

Since its political independence in July 2011, the new state of South Sudan has not been able to devise a workable vision to address pivotal historical challenges and in turn has been unable to realize the political and economic aspirations of its citizens. Instead, corruption, nepotism, mismanagement of public resources, and the absence of law and order as well as the growing tendency of undemocratic practices has become the dominant characteristics of the national and state governments. But the intensity of the violence and the widespread atrocities committed by the two warring parties, the Government of South Sudan and the SPLM/ In Opposition led by President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar respectively, in a short period of time call into question the conventional understanding of political violence which has depicted the conflict as a tribal conflict between the Dinka and the Nuer.

The current outburst of violence is not a crisis of ethnicity or tribalism. Ethnicity is the lens through which people come to perceive the way the crisis is developing.

Hence, we should differentiate between the ethnically driven violence and the political crisis which led to the ethnically driven violence in the first place. Otherwise, we will run the risk of condemning the cultural heritages and demonizing the ethnic particularities of the people of South Sudan. It is erroneous to characterize the recent political crisis as an ethnic conflict between President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and his former Vice President, Riek Machar, a Nuer, for it assumes that the political stability can be restored if the two political leaders agree to share political power. It also renders the role and the participation of other ethnic and political groups as irrelevant in the current peace talks sponsored by the Inter - Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). In reality, South Sudan is home to many, not two, ethnic groups. And, the current political crisis requires a new understanding which questions the applicability of the colonial social and cultural construction and considers the intricacy of today's South Sudan and its history of political violence.

What went wrong?

We all remember that South Sudan gained its political independence in July 2011 after long devastating liberation struggles against the central government in Khartoum. The liberation struggles were a response to economic and political marginalization, exclusive vision of national identity, and discriminatory and racist practices.

After securing their political independence, the people of South Sudan expected their new state and its political leadership to avoid the ills of the old Sudan. In addition, they also expected their government to attend to their social, economic, and political aspirations. No doubt, the new state from its inception has been besieged by heavy burden of its recent and past history. On the one hand, the history of its long costly war against the North becomes visible in the conduct and the performance of the newly independent state. Many political, economic, and social challenges have emerged including the absence of a clear vision of economic and political development, weak institutional capacity, inter communal conflicts and tensions, common practices of corruption and nepotism, and

growing tendencies of undemocratic practices within the government and the ruling party, Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), among others. On the other hand, the nature and the orientation of its political leaders has shaped how the government responds to these challenges. A lack of inclusive vision, political commitment and political will coupled with deceit and mendacity seem to be the main qualities of the political leadership. In turn, the gap between the society and the political leadership has begun to widen. Hence, feelings of alienation and frustration among the masses have grown rapidly. To preserve their political interests many political leaders took refuge into their ethnic and regional affinities at the expense of their national roles as representatives of all people of South Sudan. The distribution of national wealth, allocation of political offices, and access to economic and political powers are defined and shaped by these narrow parochial identifications.

The ongoing political violence not only exposes the failure of and inability of the state to mitigate conflict in a divided society but also raises questions about the meaning of political independence. South Sudan independence has to proceed on the basis of the cultivation of agreed constitutional principles as well as a national consensus on economic and political development. History has taught us that political independence cannot be an end in itself. Like nationalism, political independence is not enough to guarantee a stable post-independence South Sudan. Post- independence South Sudan has its own challenges which require an inclusive, democratic, and transformative vision articulated in a socio-economic project geared towards the realities of the society.

Against this backdrop the deadly events of December 15, 2013 should be analyzed and understood. Therefore, the violent conflict was a manifestation of a political crisis led by the collective failure of political leaders who seek to preserve their political power and privilege through violence. The rise of ethnic tension is a symptom of a political crisis. This is not a crisis of ethnicity, but ethnicity punctuated the crisis.

From its inception, South Sudan has never been a functioning state. Although South Sudan possesses all the legal requirements of a sovereign state, it has not

been able to translate its sovereignty into responsive policies. South Sudan government has failed to carry out the required duties of a functioning state. The current political order cannot be maintained for it failed to own its sovereignty. A new inclusive political order has to be constituted with a democratic constitutional mandate that capable of effectively addressing the challenges of state building and nation building.

The Way Forward

The damages that are being inflicted on the social fabric of the society, the absence of trust in government, as well as the growing feeling of revenge and counter revenge call upon the political leaders of South Sudan to rise above their personal ambitions of retaining their political offices. The cries of innocent children and the plight of elderly men and women who have been languishing in IDP camps around the country should have awakened the conscience of their political leaders. Sadly, the current political leadership is more interested in treating the peace talks as an opportunity to settle their personal grievances and to secure their political careers. Their intention is to define and control the outcome of the proposed discussions on an interim government. Ironically, they see themselves as 'saviors' and future leaders of the proposed government. They have forgotten that they are part of the problem which led to the political crisis and most of the violence in the first place.

Although South Africa and South Sudan differ in terms of history and politics, South Sudan can save itself from its demise as a viable state by embracing reconciliation and avoiding political choices shaped by conflicting ethnic identities. The task of rebuilding an inclusive nation and state in South Sudan is not only a political project but also an intellectual endeavour calling for honest and imaginative reflection on the past and the present. And this process of course requires the involvement of both South Sudanese and the international community.

The Role of South Sudanese

1. Constituting an Interim Government

It is clear to me that a power sharing government is not a desirable option for the current crisis in South Sudan, for the necessary preconditions are either two weak or absent at the moment. Political leaders of both factions have shown little commitment to negotiate political settlement; and they have exhibited an inability to forge a common vision about the future as well as to restrain their hardliners. Similar to Rwanda, a power sharing government in South Sudan most likely will lead to a political arrangement that will satisfy the narrow vested interests of warring factions.

What is desirable then is the formation of an interim government that gives the people of South Sudan an opportunity to return to the drawing board of cultivating a consensus on the fundamental principles of governance and citizenship. This interim government should be given a clear mandate to carry out specific tasks of ending the war, restoring law and order, returning the displaced, writing a new constitution, and conducting fair and credible national elections. Above all, the interim government should call for an inclusive national conference to bring together delegates from all states to debate the future of South Sudan.

To form an interim government, South Sudanese opposition groups, civil society and other stakeholders must agree on its composition and program. The interim government should be tasked with ending the war, restoring law and order, returning the displaced, outlining an economic plan, reforming the security and the army, and writing a new constitution. The interim government could be composed of leaders drawn from the following major groups: technocrats, academics, civil society, professional South Sudanese in diaspora, and personalities with national inclinations. These five groups can be supported by international experts who could provide technical expertise in specific areas such as governance, rule of law, and economic planning. Those international experts should be chosen by the leadership of the constituted interim government in consultation with the United Nations, the African Union, and the Troika countries.

2. Rethinking independence

Political independence entails a search for alternatives to the discourse of the colonial era. It is not a matter of a new flag and a national anthem, but a set of new political institutions. Most importantly, it also entails the development of an intellectual project that cultivates new possibilities for identities, and citizenship. This project should be crafted into three premises: First, the ongoing conflict is neither ethnic nor cultural; it's a political one. Second, these conflicting ethnic identities such as the Nuer and the Dinka are not static. They could become peaceful identities if the state was redefined and restructured in a way that makes the managing of and coexistence between overlapping identities possible in postcolonial South Sudan. Third, the national crisis of political violence requires a political solution, and it's for the people of South Sudan to reinvent themselves by redefining their conflicting political identities in order to democratize the state and de-ethnicize the society.

For the people of South Sudan, the separation of South Sudan should be seen as an opportunity for charting their own destiny and building the new state on the basis of inclusive principles of citizenship and governance. The many decades of the liberation struggles, however, should not be framed mainly as a fight against the North; rather it should be interpreted more importantly as a struggle for forging a new polity that speaks the language of inclusive citizenship and equal distribution of power and wealth for all. The main challenge for the South Sudan, therefore, is how to build a new state and nation without reproducing the ills of the old Sudan.

South Sudan has yet to devise an alternative political vision and policies that address the burden of its violent history. The state has yet to address some of the fundamental challenges that determine its viability. Those challenges include the problem of inter-ethnic conflicts, lack of democratic political practices, the absence of law and order, and the weakness of national belonging, among others. The future success of people of South Sudan lies in the inclusion of all various ethnic and political constituents and their ability to reconcile their conflicting ethnic and political interests.

3. Justice for inclusive future

The recent atrocities committed against targeted ethnic groups in South Sudan unveil the buried memories grounded in the past and invoked in the present. The dead of South Sudan's violent past remain present in the politics of the living. Of course, documenting and disseminating records of atrocities is vital in South Sudan. It advances broader social virtues of justice and accountability. A handful of academics, intellectuals, and politicians are currently racing to prepare a catalog of incriminating evidence of ethnic targeted killings committed by the government and the rebel groups. But they are doing so, not to defend the virtue of justice and undue the culture of impunity in South Sudan. Instead, they are doing so in the name of their ethnicities with the purpose of incriminating another ethnic group. Indeed, justice driven by blood relations produces bitterness instead of reconciliation and healing.

Recent history has taught us that pursuing criminal justice to seek revenge for past crimes in the aftermath of civil war or communal violence will not advance the goal of building an inclusive peaceful community. One of the lessons of the South African model in truth and reconciliation is that both sides of the history of violence were addressed; Afrikaner and black South Africans. Thus, both whites and blacks could be seen as victims and perpetrators, potentially paving the way for both to be treated as survivors. The cultivation of a common future for South Sudan, therefore, can be constructed only on the future, not the past.

The Role of the International Community

1. In consultation with the IGAD mediators, the ongoing peace process should be strengthened by including the AU Peace and Security Council, the UN Security Council, and the Troika countries (Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Credible measures of sanctions should be adopted and imposed by the regional and the international actors if the warring factions fail to commit themselves to political negotiation.
2. South Sudan's oil revenues should be put in an escrow account to be accessed by the interim government once it is constituted.

3. The African Union, the UN, and the Troika countries should persuade President Salva Kiir and the former Vice President, Riek Machar to accept the new interim government and immediately cease their military confrontations. The UN Security Council, in consultation with the AU Peace and Security Council, could authorize additional peace-keeping forces with a strong mandate to protect civilians and restore law and order.
4. The African Union and the UN Security Council should identify those who committed crimes against humanity and hold them accountable. The focus should be on naming the political leaders who were involved in committing these crimes.

If the above-mentioned regional and the international actors intervene to impose such measures, South Sudan and its people would be able to end the cycle of violence and embark on a peaceful journey towards healing the wounds inflicted in society and restoring the much needed trust in their government.

