

Predictable Causes and Prospects of the Current Political Crisis in South Sudan

By Samson Wassara



The political crisis of 15 December 2013 is the tip of an iceberg that remains to be dealt with in the immediate future or over a relatively longer period of time. The causes of the crisis are rooted in historical legacies of the long civil war that seemed to have ended with the signature of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in January 2005. However, the cosmetic reconciliation between the SPLM/A leading to the signing

of the CPA did not heal the wounds of the 1991 rift. Origins but not causes of the current crisis can be traced back to the event. But causes of the current crisis are associated with the past. What is significant is the indifference of third parties, both national and international, which contributed to the outbreak of untold violence in Juba that is spreading rapidly in the Greater Upper Nile region.

The Issue

In the first place, the failure of institutionalization of the political system and disregard for the rules of the game are the immediate foundational causes of the crisis. The Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) was established on a weak foundation. The establishment of institutions was based on ethnic aggregation and personality cults. The political system entrenched institutionalized mistrust where political leaders had more faith in ethnic protégées than in national institutions enshrined in the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (TCRSS). Established institutions were highly politicized without taking due note of rules and regulations governing them. Conversely, where there were such rules and regulations they were relegated to the margins of the *modus operandi*. These structures were inherited by the government of South Sudan at independence on 9 July 2011. Further, little attention was paid to national reconciliation. Political leaders missed the opportunity to promote post-conflict peace building among people and institutions after the unity of South Sudan demonstrated during the Referendum vote of January 2011.

Another element of discord in the process of state building is the impact of 2010 elections on relationship among SPLM political contenders in South Sudan. The aftermath of the elections witnessed crack in the ranks of SPLM members. Less attention was paid to the problem of SPLM and independents even when some members of the party resorted to violence and mini-rebellions. The logic of militarism dominated the attitudes of actors on the political stage such as “those who are not with us and have taken up weapons should be crushed militarily.” The logic of militarism dominated political discourses with strong support of political groups in the absence of active and effect civil society organizations (CSOs) in the country.

The weak nature of opposition has its role in the perpetuation of instability in the country. With exception of the numerically weak SPLM-DC, their voices were rarely heard. Many of the so-called opposition political parties engaged in unnecessary disputes that tore them apart. If they were in power they would have divided the country as what we are witnessing today. So, the absence of alternative views nurtured intolerance in the ranks of the government and the party. Therefore, the society adopted resignation and the attitude of “wait and see.” This situation of indifference did not the help the cause of state building and corrective measures in policies of the fragmented ruling party.



Structural problems in the formation of political institutions add another dimension to the current crisis. The end of long civil war witnessed integration of multiple strata of civil and military organizations into political units like the civil service, political parties and security sector institutions. These institutions were composed of blocks of war-time groups whose attitudes and behaviour structurally undermined nation-building processes. This could clearly be seen in entourages of people holding top national executive positions. They recruited armies of body guards from their family members, clans, tribal or regional clusters. This fact demonstrates the composite of the fragile political system before and after independence of South Sudan.

The foundation of democracy consists of political parties. The Sudan People's Liberation Party/Army (SPLM/A) was by far the most dominant political institution in the political system of South Sudan. Relations between the party and the army remained, nevertheless, blurred. The function of national defence was constitutionally conferred on the SPLA while the role of governance became the responsibility of SPLM as the majority party in the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) and The Council of States (CoS). The composition of the SPLA lacked an integrated structure for national defence. Allegiance of the army was divided between political factions of the SPLM and its leaders to the extent that neutral political observers regarded the army as instrument of individuals in the party. The policy of rewarding rebel groups with integration into the army created serious imbalances in the structure the SPLA at the expense of peaceful regions in other parts of South Sudan. Has this policy contributed to the current crisis? This question remains a researchable one. Hence, personal and structural disputes were developing into dangerous levels to the extent that people began to speculate the bitter end of squabbles within the SPLM/A.

Brief Analysis

The events of 15 December 2013 just justified these assumptions, which were held by many political analysts. Schism began to develop within the SPLM since April 2013 when the Deputy Chairperson of the SPLM and Vice President of South Sudan declared his intention to run for the chairmanship of the SPLM Convention expected in May 2013. The declaration of Riek Machar, the Deputy Chairperson of the SPLM, sparked an aggressive power struggle within the party and spilled over into the government. The dissolution of the entire cabinet was a landmark in the march towards political instability that the party, CSOs and faith-based organization (FBOs) ignored. Even the AU, IGAD, the UN remained unconcerned witnesses until violence flared out. This political development culminated in the fragmentation of the national army along regional and ethnic lines emanating from political discourses during the National Liberation Council (NLC) deliberations.

Consequently, the political dispute within the SPLM has resulted in bloodshed and fragmentation of the nation along ethnic and regional lines. If there were to exist effective civil society organizations, a credible national army, and proactive regional and international communities, they would have prevented the destructive pattern of political discourses in the political party and take appropriate actions regarding the party's political bigotry. One could and many others could argue that the political crisis was not an abrupt phenomenon nor did it take people by surprise. It was preventable. The region's shuttle diplomacy taking place now is just the traditional reaction of members of the international community to national and international crises threatening peace and security. They always wait until fire breaks out before they engage in a fire brigade approach to deal with flames instead of preventing them when smoke screen forms.

Inconclusive Conclusion

This piece is concluded with a question. From here what is next? Do we continue to play ostrich after this unprecedented event? How do we engage the citizens (not only intellectuals) to enable them articulate their perceptions of political parties and governance of their nation? These questions relate to issues that call for debates in the short and medium term. Everybody agrees that the immediate policy priority is to stop the senseless violence taking place now. Then, what is important is to learn lessons from the crisis. Learning lessons from the past alone may not be

enough, but applying outcomes of such lessons to substantive national questions is of real significance. Institutions of the state need serious reforms instead of transformations. National political institutions and structures should be put under the powered microscopes of political analysis. It is time for us to reflect on what is subject to reforms in the political system, how and when they should be pursued. The debate continues.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Justice and Security Research Programme, nor of the London School of Economics.

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