Ethnic Identity and Militarism

Historical realities shaping Conflicts in South Sudan

Maximiano Ngabirano

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Introduction

On 15 December 2013 South Sudan descended into civil war. Fighting that arose began as political with heavy ethnic misunderstandings between opposed parties. The conflict has ever since displaced more than 1,000,000 and killed over 10,000 while a humanitarian crisis threatens many more (Laurin Hutton 2014). South Sudanese government was ill-prepared to prevent or halt the conflict had it not been the intervention of Ugandan army and other allied reels and militias; the government would have fallen in a short time. Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its army (SPLA) quickly split along divisions largely unaddressed from the independence war. The result was the formation of the SPLA in Opposition. As time goes on, the country is at a risks tearing further apart and are pulling in regional states in the SADAC.

This paper aims at searching for the sources of the conflict and the actors in it. It stresses that putting other things aside, the military history in South Sudan has a lot in forming the source of the conflict. The military history coupled with the ethnic divide have not helped South Sudan to attain the independence they south for and the idea of a good society is far from being realized. The paper proposes that if we are to have a peaceful South Sudan and the region, we Sudan and neighboring countries have to do away with military governance to civilian governments.

The Sudan and South Sudan: From a political conflict to community security crisis

The current conflicts in of South Sudan cannot be solely pinned on a particular event or time. They have a long history emanating from the relations that existed in the former Sudan for centuries and more specifically during the colonial times when the British used the Arab groups

to rule over the African populations. Tensions gave rise to the civil wars of 1956-72 and 1983-2005 fought over the legitimacy of political, economic and security decisions emanating from Khartoum. The legitimacy wars brought in a factor of identity related things ranging from race, religion and ethnicity. They created webs of obligation and duty and began series in which South Sudanese societies, across ethnic groups increased to display high levels of social cohesion, solidarity and autonomy (Hutton Lauren 2014). Individuals across these identities began to function within complex webs of duty and obligation thus continue to define who they are in the world and how they relate to other people them.

The SPLM emerged in the post-colonial era demanding equal rights for African people through armed struggle. The struggle culminated into the independence of South Sudan from the Sudan and the current conflict which is in question came two years after South Sudan gained independence. The crisis reflects underlying tensions and distrust among South Sudanese leadership and civic population. This could be traced back to liberation struggle in 1983-2005 with some overtones to the conflicts with and within the older Sudan. While the conflict of 1983-2005 was regarded broadly as a north-south issue; the infighting among southern rebels' commanders in the 1990s' almost derailed the cause for self-determination for Southern Sudan.

The infighting lied heavily on the ethnic identities involving political groups and the army or armed militias. Despite this, the Khartoum government and the SPLM signed a peace deal in 2005 to end 21 years of conflict known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) which paved new dawn for the national census, elections and referendum for Southern Sudan and the latter gained its independence on the 9th July 2011.

Added to these historical realities, is that in January 2012 Khartoum government unilateral stopped the exportation of South Sudan's oil through its territory. South Sudan government was angered and suspended oil production for almost a year. This led to fiscal austerity measures and economic shocks in both countries. It was certain that the SPLM leadership had worked hard to put aside their internal party differences and to focus on representing a unified strong position towards bilateral engagement with Khartoum regime, regional bloc, AU, International community and other national political parties. In light of scarce resources and unequal

distribution of the available resources, fueled levels of inequality and questioned the state of ethnic bias and related marginalisations. This is to say that the current conflict has its roots in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on top of the various periods preceding that were characterized to different degrees by discriminatory policies that marginalised the southern areas and created cycles of resource depletion through the targeting of civilian livelihoods and the destruction of communities. However, failure to address the question of equality and equal distribution of power and resources, remain at the heart of this roots of the conflict.

Conflict dynamics

It appears that the peace was not consolidated in South Sudan after the CPA due to a number of outstanding issues which contributed to the contentions at all levels. Some of these processes include; post CPA relations with Sudan to finalize the remaining provisions in the CPA framework, constitutional review to allow more space for democratic governance and political dispensation of powers through an agreed system of governance, setting the date and conducting national elections in a free and transparent environment without interference from the organized forces and the SPLA. There was a space for the governing party to elect their flag bearer in 2013 prior to the national elections in 2015. The question of management of natural resources such as gold, oil and agricultural products for viable development was brought to light.

The debates on these issues indicate the position of leaders using ethnic patronage to solidify their bases. That only unfolded and explains thoroughly such pressures amidst an escalating political struggle among top SPLM members trading accusations of unilateral decisions-making, corruptions and ill-intensions against each other. The decision taken by the President Kirr in July 2013 to reshuffle the ministerial cabinet in which the Vice-President Riek Machar and other key officials were removed from their office, formalized the contention in the governing party. Following the reshuffle, series of meetings were conducted by the aggrieved SPLM party leadership in December 2013 which later brought these internal tensions to the fore.

On the evening 15th December 2013 when the SPLM convention was coming to a closed at Nykuroon Cultural Centre which was not attended by the aggrieved SPLM members, fighting erupted at 10: 45 P.M. among the presidential guard. Initially, the conflict was viewed as dispute between soldiers from the country's two largest ethnic communities; Dinka and the Nuer who are loyalist to either Kirr or Machar. However the fighting spread like a wild-fire to the military barracks/SPLA headquarters in Bilpham area north of Juba town.

The fighting continued and expanded to other parts of the country like Jonglei, Upper Nile and Unity States aggravating already existing inter-communal violence and instability (Reeve, 2012). On the 16th December, senior political and military leaders were arrested in Juba. The government accused them of "a failed coup" (Blanchard, 2014).

These dynamics are extremely difficult and complex in the interest of understanding genesis of the current conflict in South Sudan. The issues were condoned through the transition period to independence with SPLM withholding its internal tensions, historic, regional, ethnic, and personal engagement with other actors and political parties to avoid meaningful transition to democratic governance (Hutton Lauren 2014). Here, we have seen the kind of politics and marginalization of minority groups or persons out the perimeters of military and political leadership continue to sharply underpin the causes of discontent and conflict. Among others these include local grievances over access to power, resource sharing, post election grievances, and limited political opportunities for those outside the bee swamp of the SPLM/A and unrecognized traditional authority of the traditional leaders. In the preceding sections, the discussions would attempt to sight a few underlying causes in line with the dynamics stated above in brief.

Why South Sudan relapse back to war

South Sudan as a whole has since 2005 experienced some level of relative peace lessening the circle of violence (Reeve, 2012) though with isolated violence and conflict outbreaks which mar the lives of many people. For example in 2011, around 4,000 people were said to have been

killed in the country compared to 2009 where 3,000 people died as result of rebels groups fighting either the government or other militia factions (ICG, 2011).

Liberation Movement (SPLA/M) and Internal Strife

The liberation struggle was a war fought against oppression and marginalization from the then Sudan's Islamic successive regimes. According to Diana (2013) the SPLA/M leaderships in the first decade of (1983-90) were united and had a common vision for South Sudan.

However, in the 1990s the liberation movement was characterized by splits and brutal scenes of assassinations of senior military and civil leaders. The centralized and autocratic leadership of John Garang though visionary was to blame. It is asserted that the leader used iron-hand to command the movement. The military was highly structured along ethnic lines drawn from the Dinka ethnic group, in particular from Dinka Bor region (Blanchard, 2014). Deployments to frontlines were marked with favoritism against other ethnic communities. Promotions to high ranks were limited and defined according the military resource contribution in terms of people one mobilized to join the movement. These internal strife and injustices could not be contained by other disgruntled military leadership against their will and ethnic orientation and identity.

Then the former Vice President Riek Machar who was a senior Nuer SPLA commander decided to split from the centralized leadership of the SPLM/A under the late John Garang in 1991. He cited a number of grievances and human rights abuses, and disagreements on the vision of the movement.

The split faction-Southern Sudan Defense Force (SSDF) under the leadership of Riek Machar and other militias who were primary ethnic Nuer and Shilluk communities allied with the government of Sudan to fight the SPLA/M. According to ICG (2011) nearly 2, 000 were killed mostly from the Dinka ethnic community. The killings known as "Bor Massacre" aggravated ethnic hatred and fightings, especially in Greater Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity States throughout the 1990s.

In 2000, Riek Machar fell out with the Khartoum government and returned to the SPLA/M fronts. He reconciled with the SPLM/A leaders and assumed the third position in the movement. Nonetheless, there existed suspicions and distrust among them.

The reconciliation initiative following the unification of the SPLA/M leadership structure was limited. In her view Diana (2013) stated that, there was no initiative to address grieved families whose members were killed innocently during the split-over fighting between Riek Machar and John Garang forces. No justice availed to the victims and the perpetrators. On one side, root causes to the splits within the movement were not address even after the unification of the SPLA/M forces. And on the other side, the deep affliction and bitter memories of lost and destructions of communities were sidelined too. The two ethnic communities have lived and coped with these bitter memories and grievances since then. Limited reconciliatory efforts were made to heal the people of South Sudan towards nation building but were overridden by political ambitions and corruption.

One would argue that, the scale of the ethnic killings and destruction of property seen in Juba, Bor and Bentui towns between the Nuer and Dinka ethnic communities could explain the resurfacing ethnic hatred and revenge as one of the underlying historic causes to the current conflict in South Sudan.

Political Reforms within SPLM/A and Power dissension

Two years after South Sudan independence brought to light some dramatic issues with the governing party-SPLM. Those issues such party leadership structure, manifesto, constitution, the second SPLM political convention and Liberation council were cited as immediate factors and consequences to crisis in South Sudan. Since 2005, the SPLM/A leadership put aside their internal party differences and focused on representing a unified strong position towards bilateral engagement with Khartoum regime, regional bloc, AU, International community and other national political parties (Tiitmamer & Awolich, 2014).

However, the general high levels of corruptions within the SPLM party members, boiling ethnic tensions and bitter interpersonal rivalries remained. There was a growing strain of establishing effective governing institutions. The consent citizenry were calling upon accountability,

transparency, responsibilities, and good governance as a result of severe poor human, institutional and infrastructure capacity across South Sudan. These were undermined by the individual and collective divided party members' political maneuvering for 2015 elections. These dynamics indicate the position of leaders using ethnic patronage to solidify their bases. That only unfolded and explains thoroughly such pressures amidst an escalating political struggle among top SPLM members trading accusations of unilateral decisions-making, corruptions and ill-intensions against each other.

Instantly many critics argued that, to protect his position amidst international pressure to deliver effective socio-economic services, and to stand unique as party flag bearer for the next election in 2015, President Salva Kirr in July 2013 decided to reshuffle the ministerial cabinet in which the Vice-President Riek Machar and other key officials were removed from their office.

This was seen as an effort to downsize and address governance concerns. But also, it appears as a response to perceived threats to his leadership and international donor pressure to crack down on state corruption. He replaced two state governors who were constitutional elected in 2010, by presidential decree. Early in June 2013, he dismissed two senior cabinet ministers over alleged corruption charges. Kiir also dismissed ruling party secretary-general Pagan Amum, who had been publicly critical of the dismissals. Then in a couple of weeks the SPLM dominated parliament approved a new and leaner cabinet in August 2013.

Those decisions taken and endorsed by the national parliament had formalized the contention and power dissention in the governing party.

The SPLM/A left wing in their position contend that;

> President Kiir has become increasingly dictatorial, using corruption allegations to sideline perceived rivals, increasingly condoning human rights violations and abandoning the ideals of the independence struggle, and letting "regional and ethnic lobbies" override collective decision making within the ruling party (Blanchard, 2014).

On the other side, Kiir and his loyalists stated that; Riek's and his group charges were merely political grievances and his long personal quest for power.

Following the reshuffle, series of meetings were conducted by the aggrieved SPLM party leadership in December 2013 which later brought these internal tensions to the fore. The two camps; those in government and those out of it publicly stated grievance against each other.

On the evening 15th December 2013 while the SPLM convention which was not attended by the aggrieved SPLM members was coming to a closed at Nykuroon Cultural Centre, fighting erupted at 10: 45 P.M. among the presidential guard.

Initially, the conflict was viewed as dispute between soldiers from the country's two largest ethnic communities; the Dinka and the Nuer who are loyalist to either Kirr or Machar. However the power dissention within SPLM/A ranks in this case caused the conflict in South Sudan. It started as political power struggle or dispute, slide to ethnic targeted killings in support of either side to the political disputes and later turned into full military confrontations.

Socio-Economic and Political Inequalities

In the last eight years since the signing of the CPA in 2005 and the formation of the then Interim and transitional governments; most citizenry of South Sudan, especially the minority ethnic communities were marginalized and deprived of socio-economic benefits and politically underrepresented in national political decision making. From the overall perspective, the broad Dinka ethnic based government dominated and patronized socio-economic and political institutions against other ethnic minority groups. These socio-economic and political inequalities range from socio-economic and political inequalities. The latter inequalities are manifested in allocation of national political portfolios power, allocation of key ministerial positions to Dinka political elites, employment characterized by nepotism and ethnicity, access to huge finance credits support to communal or individual initiatives, education scholarships, security and military recruitments.

However, sentiments of the citizenry towards the governing party-SPLM awaken the leadership to revitalize their discriminatory policies against political elites held from other states and political parties. The international community critically alerted the governing party on issues of democratic governance, rule, security and provision of basic services to the people of South Sudan (Reeve, 2012). The hard-criticisms against SPLM were not well received by some political leadership within Kirr's administration. Shortly, the diplomatic relations with international community such as, USA, Norway, European Union and Netherlands turned

strained. Moreover, these are the communities which the supported heavily the peace process, transition period to historic referendum and many other socio-economic and political arrangements. To conciliate the international community and other actors, the president decided to embark on internal party reforms and the structure of the government. Within one year of independence, he formed a broad and inclusive government in which for the first time political elites from other parties and minority ethnicity were given key ministerial positions.

Again the circles of criticisms arose shortly after the formation of the broad and inclusive government because the latter is not delivery services, marred with a lot corruption scandals and indiscipline with the governing party-SPLM. The President decided to reshuffle the ministerial cabinet in which the Vice-President Riek Machar and other key political elites were removed from their office.

Inferably, the removal of the key political elites from the government resurfaced the hidden contention and counter-accusations against the president and ethnic based political loyalists. The fall-out SPLM camp became an opposition within the SPLM party. They held several meetings to challenge the policies of the president. These disagreements within the party led to mistrust which is associated with the underlying causes to the ongoing conflict in South Sudan.

The Impact of the conflict

It is disheartening to see a country struggling with post conflict reconstructions arrangements and human relations in terms of consolidating institutional development, reconciliation and healing, rule of law, disarmament and integration of militias into civilian life, provision of basic socio-economic services at war with itself. The current conflict worsens humanitarian situation in a fragile country facing diverse acute needs. It is estimated that more than 200, 000 civilians have been internally displaced by the conflict, including more than 60,000 sheltered at the UN-Protection of Civilians (POCs) sites in Juba, Bor, malakal and Bentiu towns. More than 40,000 people have fled across borders; Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Sudan (U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2014)

According UN findings, thousands of people have been killed, especially targeted killings against civilians based on their ethnicity from either sides of the two major ethnic communities

namely; Nuer and Dinka. These extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity (UNMISS, 2013).

There is a growing concern about the plight of those internally displaced persons who wanted to come to original settlement due to the appalling conditions in the camps. According UNOCHA (2014) reports Hygiene and sanitation emerged as a priority the POCs' at UN sites although food, water and healthcare are urgently needed. The United Nations had issued an emergency appeal for $ 166 million US dollars to immediate needs. The funding shows the most urgently required humanitarian response from over $ 1.1 billion US dollars in 2014 for humanitarian needs in South Sudan (Tiitmamer & Awolich, 2014).

The protection of IDPs' remains the primary humanitarian challenge in South Sudan. Additional interventions are required for socio-economic livelihoods, repatriation and resettlement in the aftermath of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Although the peace negotiations in Addis Ababa seem not show some progress in resolving the conflict, the people are still hopeful of peace coming to South Sudan.

Transition from war to Peace and Independence

The SPLA/M military resource mobilization and orientation during the liberation struggle against the Sudan government was directed towards forceful or voluntary recruitment of civilians into guerilla forces. Thousands of civilians, especially the youth were armed to fight the Sudan armed forces (SAF). However, the mobilization and recruitment was done along ethnic lines where each military leader wanted to have more recruits from his ethnic community. The powerful military leaders militarized ethnicity to usurp power and appropriate resources. This was also basically the means of influence to ensure that political and military power rest solely with their particular ethnic group and thus marginalize other ethnic communities.

Transition from war to peace is hampered by the heavily militarized nature of South Sudanese politics. A key factor in the extent of militarisation is the increasing power that weapons and the reliance on weapons provides to the youth, militia and self-defense units within communities. Militarisation dominates decision-making spaces and tendencies. Whereas politics is concerned

with the sharing or allocation of resources, militarisation is concerned with the domination of resources.

The disarmament exercise between years 2010-2012 led by SPLA was contentious and associated with ethnic favoritism by the top military officials (Small Arms Survey, 2012). Unfortunately after the CPA demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of the ex-combatants into civilian life was not carried effectively. Hence, thousands of small arms remained with the civilians and has exacerbated tensions, unnecessary killings, cattle raiding among communities that have historically competed for scarce water and grazing land. It has been observed that South Sudan's government has limited power to demobilize, disarm, or deter high crimes or even provide security.

Several ethnic groups with the support from their military leaders still possess small arms either to defend them or resources within their geopolitical constituencies. That usually creates unimaginable power relations between the powerful militarized ethnic groups and the weaker ones. In this context, impunity against crimes committed, cattle raided and arbitrary killings of women and children structured a circle of violence, hatred and intolerance among the ethnic communities in South Sudan. Precisely with the on-going conflict; the political and military leaders manipulated their ethnicity either safeguard power and resources or companion for change through military means. Such resorts to violence will have a long lasting negative impact on peace-building and peaceful coexistence in South Sudan.

Therefore, although it is over emphasized that the conflict is inherently political which requires a political solution; rebuilding trust among ethnic groups, political and military leaders affected by ethnic

Fragile Security System: The Legacy of liberation movement

Like any other liberation force in Africa (RPF, NRM, etc) the SPLM has struggled to transform itself from an armed rebellion into a liberation movement and then into a popular government. Dynamics in such transformations are often complicated by the fact that the former rebels want

to attain and retain power at any cost. Likewise, SPLM/A delivered liberation, and therefore opposition to the party is seen as opposition to independence and the sovereignty of the state. The SPLM has worked through the election, a referendum and independence to carve a narrative of liberator and to seal in people's minds the links between living independently of violent Arab rule and the SPLM (Hutton Lauren 2014).

The competing legacy of fighting former rebels for state power has come to bring security threats in the country. It is therefore most appropriate to think of how to transform the state from liberators civilian rule. This discussion involves civilians and civil societies to work on this before anything else. From other contexts, revolutionary leaders and militarized systems in civic and political life have not yielded anything to substantive to state transformation.

In the aftermath of political dissension within the governing party-SPLM in 2013 it was clear that South Sudan portrays the picture of a fragile state prone to conflict. The long path to independence in 2011 certainly raised a lot of concerns for political, socio-economic democratic reforms to meet the aspirations of the citizens towards nation building. However the governing party and other political parties accommodated in the government pinned down these underlying desires and grievances with no political will to address them.

These grievances range from socio-economic and political differences and disparities towards nation-building through a democratic consensus process after the signing comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) in 2005. Many patronizing critics argue that the problems were partly over-shadow by the post-CPA implementation arrangements; establishment of governance institutions, and South Sudan referendum exercise. On the other hand, others put the weight of blames to the failure of self-sustained leadership in managing these differences. The political elites were pre-occupied with their personal interests reflected in rampant corruptions; political and military mobilizations along ethnic identities, impunity against rule of law and democratic reforms at all levels of governance in South Sudan.

Subsequently, these internal and external untamed grievances divided and placed the governing party-SPLM into camps of contentions. There was a general dissatisfaction of the marginalized

communities towards the government and other weak political parties who could not press for political, social and economic reforms. Salva Kirr Mayardiit and the leadership of the SPLM were under pressure from the international community on issues of corruptions, constitutional reforms, delivery of socio-economic services, management of inter-ethnic conflicts and insecurity in major towns. In 2013, the president attempted to make some political reforms within his government but that was marked with suspicious and sentimental judgment towards SPLM leadership.

Unfortunately, considering the diversity and complexity of ethnic communities in South Sudan in their different political and social and economic dispersions, even some of the majority ethnicities felt that social injustices exist promulgated by the ruling Dinka political leadership under the leadership of President Kirr.

The sentiments built along ethnic identity slide into military ranks in the SPLA which is the military movement (wing) of the sitting government. Consequently, this trend of issues led to the 15th December 2013 clashes in Juba between the SPLA forces to the President and the then Vice-President Riek Machar. Because of its northern neighbour, Sudan, the security of South Sudanese citizens and their property is closely tied to the security of the South Sudanese state. For many communities in South Sudan, independence has not translated into living free from fear. The continuing strategies of conflict that target communities and their assets has reinforced inequalities, stunted development and contributed to an environment of fear and paranoia, resulting in cycles of community self-defense and revenge.

The primary security challenges in South Sudan relate to inter-communal violence, rebel movements and local militia. These strands of violence are often intimately linked with similar dynamics of youth mobilisation and localised and nationalised grievances; they are also intrinsically ethnic and communal in nature. But also, perpetrators of violence – be they in uniform, urban criminal gangs or cattle rustlers – have a shared understanding of the weaknesses in the justice and security sectors that allow for impunity. This has been exacerbated by the extent to which the government has been involved in exclusionary practices that allow ethnic backgrounds, rather than national policy interests, to influence decision-making. Additionally

ethnic narratives are deeply constructed on masculine identities of heroism and bravery. As history constantly repeats itself, without the explicit management of inclusion, national unity and collective identity, the ethnic composition of South Sudan is a risk to the stability of the state.

Justice, accountability and the rule of law

Diana (2013) intimates that the violence within South Sudan appears to be related to deeper problems of lack of governance, security and rule of law as well as poor economic opportunities; particularly in remote pastoralist areas rather than tensions around independence. However, the violence were spatial and do not put any treat to the state as whole. The violent conflicts vehemently were connected to cattle raiding, but later escalate beyond the circles of inter – communal tensions associated with deliberate targeting women and children (Small Arms Survey, 2012).

The Government of South Sudan has been under pressure from the international community, human rights advocates and donors to hold security forces, especially the SPLA, accountable for abuses. South Sudan Law Society (SSLS) in 2013, the authored a comprehensive report on the judicial system in South Sudan calling for more accountability and the strengthening of the rule of law (Hutton Lauren 2014). The culture of abuse and impunity entrenched in the military rule has engaged with communities – often rooted in ethnic biases – has undermined the ability of the government and its security forces to establish a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and also undermined internal legitimacy, thereby weakening the already fragile social contract between state and citizen.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

The drivers and dynamics of the conflict are not new phenomena for fragile States like South Sudan emerging from many years of civil unrest. There are definitely factors associated with such uncalled crisis in South Sudan which might underpin the complexities of the conflict situation. It is also difficult to draw the casual relations between these causes and dynamics of the conflict two years after independence. The ongoing conflict therefore stemmed from internal liberation unresolved grievances, human rights abuses, militarized ethnicity for political power

and influence, political elites scrambles for power and resources, political reforms within the governing party, socio-economic disparities and exclusions. These causes and dynamics both posed potential challenges for an inclusive nation-building vision as well as important post conflict reconstruction and human relations as an avenue of resilience and tolerance for a peaceful, stable, democratic and prosperous South Sudan if the peace deal is signed soon.

In order to get out of this vicious circle of violence, real state transformation has to be realized by removing former military rebels who have remained rebels in state house from state power. The South Sudan need to redefine the often used terminologies and make meaning of revolutionary spirit not to mean hold on power but transformation of power from military to civilian rule.

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