



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## Weekly Review

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### **The Return and Reinstatement of Former Political Detainees into the Leadership Ranks of South Sudan's Ruling SPLM: What is its Worth?**

*Jok Madut Jok*

The recent announcement of the reinstatement of former senior leaders of the ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), who were dismissed by its chairman in 2013 from the party ranks, came as yet another unsurprising and yet questionable action by a party that has been plagued for years by so many troubles of its own making. The return of former political detainees from Kenya to consult with the President of South Sudan, and their planned trip to Pagak in Upper Nile to meet with the leadership of the armed opposition, all with a view to settling the country's 18-month conflict, have spurred debates in the country. Some citizens and commentators are expressing cautious optimism about the coming of peace, while others are downplaying the political and peace value of these events. This moment was preceded by numerous blunders within the party leadership dating back a decade since the country emerged from a destructive war of liberation from the Sudan, including the dismissal of the party's Deputy Chairman and the Secretary General, which had come in contravention of its constitution that requires a national convention to elect these offices.

The chairman had argued that these offices had rendered themselves unconstitutional for having failed to organize the national convention of the party at its designated time. In his decisions to dismiss these leaders, the chairman had broken the very party constitution he referenced. Ironically, the dismissed SPLM members accused the chairman of refusing to hold a meeting of the Political Bureau, the party's highest executive organ, to workout mechanisms for the resolution of a number of challenges that had been facing the party for a while. This discontent morphed into a crisis that eventually plunged the country into the unfolding civil war.

This Sudd Institute's review provides some historical background to the dismissal of some of the party's top leadership, its subsequent breakup into three branches, the conflict that ensued in the country in the wake of this breakup, the quest for a resolution of this conflict, and the June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 order to reinstate some of these leaders. The review also

weighs the significance of these developments in terms of ending the conflict and shaping the future path for the party and the country.

These squabbles within the party, along with the dismissal of the entire cabinet on July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, came to form part of the political crisis that led to the outbreak of the on-going conflict in the country, splitting the ruling party into three factions. One section whose leaders are the subject of the recently announced amnesty and reinstatement was formed by accident following the outbreak of violence in Juba on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013. This group, popularly known as Former Detainees (FDs), was accused of involvement in an alleged plot to overthrow the government. The FDs were arrested and detained in the wake of this violence, with some of them put on trial to answer to treason charges. But due to a mounting pressure from both the local rights groups and the international community, they were eventually released into the custody of the Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, and were transferred to Nairobi, where they have lived ever since. They have since been referred to as the SPLM-Former Detainees or Group of 11, now down to 10 or G-10, after one of them joined the armed rebellion. The other section, the main branch which has remained in control of the state under the leadership of President Salva Kiir Mayardit, dubbed as SPLM-in Government, is involved in pitch military confrontation with the break away branch led by former Vice President Riek Machar Teny, the SPLM-in Opposition. The confrontation has raged on since then, costing the country an incalculable price, creating such massive suffering in the civilian population, tainting the image of the country globally, and causing ethnic rifts that will take years to mend.

It was within the efforts in search for an end to the on-going destructive civil war that a realization came, that the SPLM warring factions might be able to overcome their differences in the peace negotiations, if a parallel effort was put into the intra-party dialogue with an eye to reunification. To this end, the so-called Intra-SPLM dialogue was encouraged and supported by Tanzania's ruling CCM, South Africa's ruling ANC and Ethiopia's ruling EPRDF. All of the three ruling parties were former liberation movements with similar sentiments about the importance of keeping historic liberation parties intact and in power in Africa. It was in the context of this dialogue that the former political detainees began to imagine themselves as a middle ground between the two warring groups. They see themselves as cleaner-handed for non-involvement in the armed violence and a potential savior of South Sudan.

Reunification meetings were convened in Tanzania's northern city of Arusha, hosting the SPLM three branches. The leaders of the three parties agreed to reunify the party and to acknowledge their responsibility for the tragedy that has befallen their young country and owe peace and stability to their people. The principals of the three factions shook hands in front of the cameras, made pledges to compromise in the name of peace, providing a glimmer of hope that the Arusha deal might positively influence the peace process that has been haltingly underway since early 2014 in Ethiopia under the auspices of IGAD. It was within the drive to implement the February 2015 Arusha agreement that the Former

Detainees were invited to return to Juba and to work for peace from within, despite the general suspicion about them.

On arrival of their forward delegation of five in Juba on June 1<sup>st</sup>, coming on the wings and protection of the South African and Kenyan governments, they held consultations with the President and were expected to proceed to Upper Nile to meet with Opposition's Machar, a proposition Machar's aides have indicated they were open to. The Chairman of the party who had ordered the dismissal of these gentlemen issued a statement on June 3<sup>rd</sup> reinstating them at the recommendation of the Political Bureau, making a mockery of the party's constitution once again and confirming what the critics had always said about the SPLM having no basic democratic principles within itself.

These troubles facing South Sudan's liberation movement turned ruling party, however, are not new and will certainly not be solved through these measures alone. The party had wobbled through countless challenges, visionless decisions, financial misconduct, autocracy, and disregard for its organs. Ever since the SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005, which ended the region's war with the Sudan, it has seen itself as the country, but failed to demonstrate leadership. Instead, the party has only prided itself with what is proving to be an empty liberation hubris.

The troubles with the SPLM begun with the way its military wing, the SPLA, conducted itself in relation to the civilian population during the liberation war and how the party morphed from reforming the united Sudan into championing South Sudan's secession. This shift has given the SPLM a sense of entitlement and desire to monopolize the political and economic space in the country. It has since been beleaguered by lack of a credible development agenda for the new and war-ravaged state of South Sudan, accusations of corruption and fiscal misconduct within the party's top ranks, the undemocratic ways in which party candidates for the 2010 elections were selected, the import of militarist culture into the affairs of what is supposed to be a political party, and above all by the apparent unwillingness of the party leadership to listen to the cries of its own followers about the dismal outlook for the country, all leaving the citizens with a litany of disappointments and complaints following the country's independence.

The issue of corruption has particularly been a topic of much discussion since 2005, when the then Secretary General, Pagan Amum Okiech, started to trade accusations with the then Minister of Finance, Arthur Akuien Chol, over the disappearance of some 60 million US Dollars that the Sudanese government had given to the party soon after the peace agreement. Debates about the squandering of this money and the rest of the party's resources have not ceased since, making its entire leadership, including these returning former detainees, stand accused of pocketing the nation's resources while the rest of the populace swam in poverty and misery.

The SPLM, a populist party that has long mistaken the independence euphoria among the people of South Sudan for a continued popular support and legitimacy, has been

riding on the back of this euphoria without assessing its own performance, capacity and self-reflection. It only started to show signs of waking up to these realities in 2012, when its leadership realized that its large membership throughout the country was grumbling about the failures of the ruling elite. It sent delegations to all the ten states to test the pulse of the people about how the party's ability to govern was perceived. The delegation, under the overall supervision of the Deputy Chairman, the former Vice President Riek Machar, was also tasked to carry a message of thanks and gratitude to the people of South Sudan for their struggle and role in liberating the country. What the delegation found was shocking, as they were asked difficult questions about the whereabouts of the SPLM's war-time promises of "taking towns to the villages," "peace through development," "a classroom for every martyr's child," "a paycheck for every wounded hero," a "clinic for every village," "unity in diversity" or "an-all weather road to all states," etc, all of them brainchild of the late John Garang, one of the founding fathers.

John Garang, it seems, has gone with these objectives when he died in that fateful helicopter crash on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005. This prompted a flurry of discussions about the SPLM's "lost of vision," and how to get the party back on track. These discussions became uncomfortable to the top SPLM decision-makers, causing internal rifts and disagreements that have now pushed the country into the brink of collapse.

All of this history is first-hand experience and well known to every South Sudanese, the only squabble about it being the defensive attitude of the party leadership and not the facts about it. Fewer can dispute the fact that the SPLM has failed the people of South Sudan in the post-independence political transition. The question spurred by the return of the ex-detainees and their reinstatement into the party folds is no longer about their right to be reinstated, nor is it about their ability to clean up the mess of the last decade within the party, but more about the future of the party and the country. Does it really cause any ordinary South Sudanese to hold their breath that these former detainees will bring order back to the party? Were they not party to the mess in the first place, unless there is promise of their rebirth? What is the worth of reunifying the SPLM if all that the country gets out of it is a return of the same old faces, whether in the G-10, the government or the armed opposition, to running the country once again? We imagine most South Sudanese are desperate for peace at the moment, and if this reunification means an end to the conflict, people will most likely swallow their grievances for the time being. But, if the SPLM leadership is genuinely interested in being a genuine political party of the future, with the complete strategic agenda to end the ravaging insecurity and instability, for the reconstruction of the war-torn country, for the repatriation of refugees and IDPs, for economic development, for reconciliation and unity of the country for a plan to engage the vibrant young population as a resource for development, it must demonstrate so. Without following the above-mentioned strategic points, it is a mere reunification and a return to the old status quo. If the party simply reinstates a group of people it once deemed corrupt and incompetent and dismissed them, all without a conception of how to prepare the next generation of party leaders and the due course of

the party structures, the SPLM may well start writing its own obituary now, for it will die together with its current aging leadership.

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### **About Sudd Institute**

*The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.*

### **Author's Biography**

***Jok Madut Jok** is a cofounder of the Sudd Institute. He is the author of three books and numerous articles covering gender, sexuality and reproductive health, humanitarian aid, ethnography of political violence, gender based violence, war and slavery, and the politics of identity in Sudan.*