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P. O. Box 34, Juba, South Sudan • Tel: +211 (0)956 305 780
Email: thesudd.institute@gmail.com • www.suddinstitute.org

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The 2015 National Census and Elections An Analysis of President Kiir's Announcements

*Augustino Ting Mayai
Martin Abucha
Jok Madut Jok*

Introduction

The recent violence in South Sudan has sparked a range of reactions comprising deep divisions in public criticisms between those supporting the government and those supporting the rebels. These public reactions also spurred analysis of contemporary and historical causes of discontents in the SPLM, what the role of the international bodies should be, media propaganda, and how the government should respond in order to restore peace in the country. Despite substantial international attention from within the region of East Africa and beyond, primacy seems placed upon short-term interventions that immediately reestablish tranquility in an overwhelmingly distressed country. Yet, attaining lasting peace goes beyond the issues of restoration of the status quo. It invokes delimiting the conflict itself, with pronounced emphases on participatory democracy or political reforms, institutional and administrative conditions, social justice, security and civil service sectors reforms, the rule of law and accountability, and governance.

In view of the prevailing public discourse on the conflict, long-term reforms in all the sectors should be inextricably linked to political reforms, a widespread opinion that identifies the strained political space as a serious burden on the country and is intrinsically linked to current violence. However, the government's response is politically promising, with President Salva Kiir Mayardit having recently publicly announced his plans for the next 12 months, provided that a measure of peace is fully employed.

On January 23, 2014 (Gurtong¹), President Kiir enthusiastically assured the public of the conduct of the national census and elections, respectively. The elections are scheduled to take place in 2015, but are constitutionally conditioned upon the national census' conduct. The census exercise, then, requires being conducted this year so as to meet the 2015 elections deadline. The political will expressed by the leadership in an attempt to galvanize calm in the country is commendable, however, the president might have been over-confident in his pronouncement to conduct two of the most financially, organizationally, and logistically demanding projects in just a single year. This is so because the conduct of a credible census requires a minimum of 3 years. Most notably, the process of the more recent Sudanese census (2008) took exactly three years, with preparations that commenced in 2005. Moreover, the future census exercise remains unfunded, making the president's optimism even more uncertain.

Although the President's new statements are politically reassuring, regrettably, they are pragmatically incomplete. They assume that all areas of the country will be stable enough to undergo such an important process as the census and household survey. They equally assume that the public goodwill that a credible process requires will be available among a people so shocked by the recent violence, with half a million people displaced from their homes and unsure of their return in time for this massive and crucial exercise. This should be politically disturbing because the short-term political gains of the gesture, no matter its timely importance, are destined to eventually backfire when the promised deliverables do not, as usual, come to fruition.

Regardless of the merit of the government's announcement, we suspect that the leadership is misinformed about the technical nature of the two projects it seeks to undertake. In light of this, our analysis then cautions the leadership against blanket political assurances, offers basic nuances into the census conduct, suggests the general elections be conducted in 2015, and calls for the establishment of presidential support technical team (PRESTECT) comprising rigorously trained scientists. The next sections discuss the national census, implications of the current violence, and the long-term implications of empty political assurances. Finally, we conclude with policy counsel, which considers, among other things, instituting presidential support technical team.

The National Census

A census is used to generate important information related to the entire population of the area. It has political and scientific implications. The political implications include the redistricting of electoral constituencies, allocation of resources or services, and policy development on migration, labor force, education, and health, among others. The scientific aspect constitutes analyzing

¹ President Kiir Announces Plans For 2015 Elections; January 23, 2014
<http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ID/14698/Default.aspx>

census information to assess morbidity and mortality, scale and pattern of migration, fertility behavior, marriage and divorce, distribution of wealth/income, educational attainment, population growth, housing conditions, and occupation, among others. The scientific results are specifically used to inform government's policy decisions and designs. These aspects make the census quite essential in both political and policy realms. But despite the commendable will the South Sudanese government has expressed in undertaking the census along with elections, accomplishing this in just one year is quite ambitious, if not totally impractical. We discuss the basis for our reservations below.

Timing of a Census Under Normal Circumstances

Drawing from previous experience, we briefly survey the census' cost in time and money. The planning and implementation of the 2008 national census took 3 years, excluding 18 months worth of analyzing the social characteristics of the population. Still, this is an exercise implemented under relatively normal circumstances. Beyond political deliberations, which involve budget development and its passing at the council of ministers and parliament, the technical aspects of the census, namely mapping, geographical coding, questionnaire development, personnel recruitment and training, and the acquisition of equipment and stationaries, require as much time as over 1 year. Data processing can take up to 18 months, with an additional 3 months for tabulation and the release of final results. From reliable sources, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) is still looking for \$100 million to carry out the planned 2014 census. But this cost is likely to increase by 20 percent or more because of the current crisis. The additional cost relates to the full restoration of the three centers destroyed in the Upper Nile region.

Given these underlying technical and logistical circumstances, we believe that the president's proposition of a census being conducted in one year is clearly unrealistic.

Implications of Violence on Migration and Infrastructure

The current violence has displaced hundreds of thousands of people, turning many places into rubbles, particularly in the Upper Nile region. The induced out-migration led to shifts in populations, with many residents from the affected areas taking refuge in nearby states and other countries. The return of these refugees to their homes in time for the census will require considerable improvements in security, infrastructure, and essential services. It also requires massive financial investments, including the capacity and willingness of the international community to assist in this endeavor. This return-migration process alone, which is a necessity for electoral redistricting, can take well over a year.

As well, the decimation of the infrastructure in the Upper Nile region has serious setbacks for the NBS, the institution charged with the census conduct. The NBS has 10 support centers across the nation. It is our understanding that the 3 centers located in the Upper Nile region have been looted and destroyed. To restore these statistical offices to their previous standard or even better requires significant investments, both money and time. This process can as well take over a year of intensive and appropriately coordinated activities. The induced migration and the dismantled infrastructure, so to be clear, antagonize the president's ambition of census conduct in just a year.

Political Assurances

The signing of the CPA and the independence of South Sudan raised the bar of expectations in the citizenry. During the CPA, the citizens expected physical and food security to improve, access to education and health services to increase, infrastructure to garner massive investments, and political liberties, rights, and freedom restored. In addition, the peoples were promised of intolerance to maladministration, namely zero tolerance of corruption. All of this, in a nutshell, meant all sorts of developments for the historically tormented society. To many, laying this foundation made independence—attained much later—a final consolidation of sovereignty.

No doubt, there has been progress in such areas as inter-state road networks, communication, institutional setup, international partnership, demobilization of former combatants, and the integration of former militia groups into the national army. Yet, there are areas whose conditions have either remained unchanged or deteriorated over the years. For instance, both the SPLA and the SPLM saw little reforms; education and health have seen limited improvements. The security situation worsened in Jonglei, Lakes, and Warrap states. Furthermore, corruption skyrocketed, with 89 percent of the citizens interviewed in 2007 reporting a prevalence of the phenomenon despite the president's condemnation of the same a year earlier. Worrying still, the 2010 corruption perception survey yielded a high 98 percent in favor of those reporting the existence of corruption in the public system (Anticorruption Commission, 2007 & 2010).

Whatever the landscape of the management problems that surfaced during the interim period might have been, the public did little to seek accountability, perhaps substituting a well-deserved independence for everything else. But the government's political assurances never ceased. Soon after independence, South Sudan's president announced to the overjoyed citizens a 100-day promise that was supposed to improve educational access in the country. Over two years later, little is publicly known about what has become of the project.

In 2012, President Kiir accused his former and then serving colleagues of having stolen from the public a sum of \$4b. Ordering his subordinates to open a bank account in Kenya the president issued 75 letters, asking for these funds to be returned. Of the 75 officials accused, only Madam Awut Deng and Dr. Lual Deng

cleared their names. Nearly two years later, the public is unaware of government's achievements under this project. Even interesting, there have been no reports of anyone having deposited any money in the said account and no actions have been taken against those who did not act as ordered.

This new announcement on census and elections conduct sets up the government for yet another failure, adding to the long list of already unfulfilled political assurances. Below we offer our best opinion on how to turn this announcement into reality. Of importance in our advice is the needed strengthening of institutional capacity of the presidency.

The National Elections

Although the South Sudanese constitution mandates the census be conducted before the national elections, in light of an ongoing unrest, there should be exception to this clause. Though the CPA mandated the 2008 census to provide data for both planning and political purposes such as constituency construction and wealth sharing, unfortunately it was rarely used for any of these purposes. Politicians complained of undercounting and rejected the results. And to avoid the 2008 backlash, the conduct of the new census should precede the processes of peace, reconciliation, and the return of the internally displaced persons and refugees.

But due to extraordinarily high political demands and because the expectations for a credible, national census are equally relatively high, the conduct of the census can be postponed to a future date, while the 2015 national elections go on. Here, there would be no electoral constituency redistricting; instead, the 2008 census results may be reused to allocate constituencies as occurred in 2010, with slide adjustments to return-migration preceding December 15, 2013 (data could be obtained from IOM and UN OCHA). However, the recent shifts in the population due to the current violence remain a fundamental problem, and this needs resolving prior to the general elections. Essentially, return-migration must be made attractive.

To ensure massive returns of recently displaced persons to their homes, the government and its allies need to intensify efforts that make return-migration more attractive. There are two critical programs in mind. The first concerns the consolidation of peace to guarantee security and stability mostly in Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile states. The time it may take the displaced persons to return home will intimately vary with the security conditions on the ground. Secondly, reconstruction activities, which place priority on essential services, should be packaged along with peace programming. Here, the principal emphasis lies with rejuvenating health and educational services in the most affected areas. Improving basic services increases the potential for the displaced to decide in favor of returning home as opposed to continuing to live under humiliating refugee conditions. It might also be necessary for the people to see a program of justice and reconciliation started early on, so they can begin to feel genuinely and

collectively tied to the nation state. But if the return process is delayed, then special registration and other arrangements for the displaced to vote where they are should be arranged. This may necessitate a similar wisdom utilized in the 2011 referendum.

Policy Suggestions

The government is on point emphasizing the importance of the census and the general elections in revitalizing stability in South Sudan. Unfortunately, there is not much time to carry out the two exercises simultaneously. This circumstance suggests that the census be conducted at a later date, perhaps in 2.5 years. But the elections do not necessarily have to wait. Constituencies developed from the 2008 census results can be used for 2015 elections. This would invoke amending the Transitional Constitution to stipulate the census conduct every 10 years, with 2018 as the next census year. Essentially, the same constitution will need to authorize the 2008 census for national and local planning, including elections, for the next few years. However, preparations for the census would have to commence immediately to meet the 2018 deadline.

Similarly, the fact that the president seems to regularly fall short of his presumably well-intended political assurances has probably to do with the nature of information upon which he bases his decisions. Perhaps the nation would be better served if the president and the entire cabinet have a technical recourse for decision-making processes—a team of robustly trained scholars representing distinct areas of interest. The primary mission of this team would be to develop qualified insights into particular issues for strategic policy decisions in the presidency and the cabinet alike.

Finally, reviving peace in the country should be a priority of all. Clearly, the 2015 elections depend on the commitment of the warring sides to immediately cease hostilities and restore security and basic services in the next few months. Exercises of justice and accountability, reconciliation, and participatory constitutional review should also commence immediately. A successful return-migration significantly depends on these factors.

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.

About the Authors

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.

Augustino Ting Mayai is the Director of Research at the Sudd Institute. As a demographer, his major research interests include childhood mortality differentials in the Sudan and South Sudan, applied quantitative methodology (econometrics), applied development research, social accountability and public service delivery, and the demography of conflicts and violence.

Martin Abucha is an engineer with specializations in design, software development, and system maintenance. Martin worked at the South Sudan's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) as data processing advisor for several years.