



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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South Sudan and the Risks of Unrest

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Though South Sudanese have been expressing disappointment in the way their young state has been run ever since independence was declared in 2011, they have been more recently appalled by news that has bombarded them about government failures, fiscal misdeeds, unclear policies, uncertainties of what the future holds for them in terms of security, development, livelihoods, basic freedoms, the constitution, reconciliation, census, elections and the balance of powers. More concerning is the fact that the legislative assembly is at the mercy of the president instead of carrying out its constitutional mandate that oversees the actions of the executive. Another subject of heated discussions is the fate of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) the liberation movement turned ruling party, whose structures the president recently dissolved, rendering the party nearly paralyzed. In short, the noose seems to tighten ever more around the neck of the entire nation.

The bombshell news, however, was the recent announcement that South Sudan has accumulated a whopping 4.5b South Sudanese Pounds (SSPs) debt in the short two years since the shut down of oil production. Our inquiries reveal that during austerity period following the shut down of oil production in early 2012, the country continued rampant borrowing at very high interest rates and short repayment schedules. When the oil production resumed just recently, the government found itself servicing these loans that were acquired under seriously opaque circumstances, if not entirely fraudulent. Why are South Sudanese only hearing about this debt now? Who had approved it? What projects were funded with it? Was it spent on salaries and what is the evidence or justification?

South Sudan adopted the austerity measures immediately following the oil shutdown, reducing salary and state transfers expenditures. The newly emerging country's loans have made the austerity policies a big lie. However, what was the channel through which these loans were transmitted to South Sudan? Did South Sudanese really spend this much money within South Sudan? Did it come in suitcases every month as the rumor has it or by bank transfers as would be logical and mandatory? If it was the latter then the paper trail should be there for all to see. If it was the former then a grave crime has been committed and the individuals in charge should be publicly interrogated by the parliament. Perhaps the shady nature of this transaction makes the figure even questionable. Above all, how is it that a government that declared that it had enough reserves to cover its expenditure for two years in the wake of the 2012 oil shut down has ended in such an unfathomable debt? Was the public lied to about the reserves?

These are the subjects of animated discussions among South Sudanese in tea stalls all across the country, in government offices, on university campuses and numerous other places where groups sit together as friends or relatives and colleagues. Discussions are also going on all over the cyber space about the question of where the country is headed, about the fate of the many communities that are increasingly engulfed by insecurity, food deficits, youth unemployment and about the question of how long it takes for people's patience to wear out. Has the government of

South Sudan not been given enough benefit of the doubt? Have the people of South Sudan not been strategically patient enough about the promises of independence, saying that “our country is new and we must give it time?”

What has become of President Kiir’s 100 days projects promised at the time of independence? How was it that parliament proposed currency devaluation and then forgot about it, so that when the Central Bank went ahead with it, it was forced to retract it? Have any of the declared projects been sufficiently implemented, supervised and progress reports fed back to the president or relevant supervisory constituents within the government? Why has the president or the parliament not asked for such reports? Only in South Sudan do spending agencies receive appropriated budgets but are not required to make periodic financial accounting reports.

The question is no longer just a matter of weakness, mediocrity or human errors, the blame for which none of us would be free. The real issue is that on top of inevitable human frailties, both the central government and state authorities have violated every constitutional provision on governance. The president has fired elected officials in the name of national security, forced the law makers to accept his choice of the speaker of the parliament, allowed his ministers and administrators to raid public coffers, and above all, the decision to dissolve the structures of the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Movement (SPLM), using the executive powers as president, not only as chairman of the party. The party’s constitutional provisions that were cited by the SPLM secretary for external affairs as the basis for the president’s action were incorrectly invoked. For example, whereas party officials have referenced the 2008 constitution, chapter X (25) sections (d), (e), (f) and (g) as the provisions upon which the president has based the decision, these articles simply list the powers of the chairman, but do not actually mention anything about the chairman’s powers to dissolve party structures.

State governors have also been doing the same, referencing unverified constitutional powers to justify total abuse of office. In Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, for example, elected members of the state legislature have been dismissed while others have been threatened with dismissal or jailing. Lakes State is in total mayhem, as the care-taker governor has ignored all systematic manners or procedures, issuing decrees that mandate violence against citizens, threatening law makers and swearing in state cabinets without consultations with the legislature.

What is happening to the ordinary people in this country under the weight of this mix of poor governance, inflation at 50 per cent and rising, skyrocketing food prices, economic inequality, waning pride in the nation and subsequent ethnic warfare? While some of these problems are aggravated by the challenges that ordinarily face post-war societies, most of them are rooted in the unconstitutional actions of public officials. There is now eye soaring divide between the new small group of wealthy individuals whose sources of wealth are dubious and the bulk of the population that is still living quite under precarious and desperate circumstances. What does this potent mixture mean for South Sudan? The longer this situation continues the more likely that the political structures that underpin the country’s relative stability will be questioned by the citizens and potentially eroded as more and more people become even more desperate.

The list of problems is very long, if all one wants to do is to chronicle the problems and challenges facing South Sudan in the area of governance, rule of law, responsible development programs and genuine party politics where opposition parties can confront the ruling party with facts. The heated informal discussions mentioned above have been the only outlet for the people’s opinion about the state of affairs. But even most of these discussions are merely descriptive of events, real and imaginary. They are missing real analysis that points out the steps that will move the country out of the current political quagmire and into a real discussion with all the stakeholders, so that mistakes can be collectively identified and the future of the country is properly charted.

In the absence of really active party politics, the ruling party has now been at the mercy of those in the executive, the press is either inaccessible to the majority of citizens or poor in its coverage of the events, and authorities are not tolerant of criticism. It has consequently become easy for the political class that is currently in office to think that all is well in the country. In deceiving themselves to think this way and burry their heads in the sand about the challenges facing this nation, those holding office, as the record of the last eight years has shown, do not seek opinion from the professionals and the technocrats, and are dismissive of the divergent opinion that comes from outside the top government circles.

Many officials maintain this attitude until they lose office, surprisingly turning around later as critics without recognizing the damage they did when they were in office. But the calm that is prevailing in most towns across South Sudan today is quite deceptive. Underneath it all is a brewing discontent, the explosive consequences of which remain unimaginable to the leadership, as the said leadership has been benefiting from the history of South Sudanese popular and blind support for the SPLM. But is anyone holding office today, whether in the executive, legislature, judiciary, public financial institutions or the armed forces reflecting on what happens when populations, especially in countries with such huge youthful population as South Sudan, become so poor, desperate, unable to speak, insecure and above all when they lose trust in their leadership? Such is the stuff with which civil unrests, protests, and even outright revolutions are made of. The political leadership of South Sudan should not play with fire.

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 Author

Jok Madut Jok is the Chair of the Board of Directors and a co-founder 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.