



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## POLICY BRIEF October 9, 2013

### **SPLM's Internal Politics: A Catalyst to the Dissolution of Government**

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#### **Executive Summary**

This brief provides updates on the political developments within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) party after the dissolution and the formation of the new government. This piece brief is a direct response to many inquiries that have come from multiple sectors of the society eager to understand what is becoming of the popular movement. The brief responds to some of these lingering concerns and assesses where the party currently stands in terms of the unity of its structures, considering the paralysis that had beleaguered it prior to the recent government dissolution. The reshuffle of the government followed months of reported stalemate within the ruling party's political bureau, which is alleged to have paralyzed it and the government, culminating in the government's most courageous shakeup. In fact, the shakeup had been rumored for months, and in the evening of July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013, President Kiir announced the dissolution of his entire cabinet, including the dismissal of his longstanding Vice President and the suspension of the SPLM Secretary General (SG). The scope and magnitude of this action by the president stunned the whole nation and the world.

#### **The Public Reaction in Juba**

South Sudanese are not new to government reshuffles; the President had restructured his government many times before, particularly during the interim period, making a reshuffle business as usual. However, the unprecedented dissolution of the government in July 2013 was fear provoking because it involved a removal of the long-serving vice president, Dr. Riek Machar and the party Secretary General, Pagan Amum. The atmosphere that followed the evening of the presidential decision was frighteningly tense. Mobile networks were jammed as citizens tried to share the news with relatives all over the country and abroad.

The day after the dissolution, the Sudd Institute's team went to the Parliament to conduct interviews in an effort to make sense of the situation. While at the

Parliament, the news came in of fighting having reportedly broken out in the Konyokonyo and Jebel markets. Within a few minutes of receiving the news, the parliament was deserted. By the time the Sudd Institute team got out people could be seen running in all directions. Students marched out of their classes and ran home; public officials got into their cars to also get home; and businesses were closed and employees released. There was an instantaneous traffic jam. It was chaotic and nerve-racking for all who experienced it.

The panic was fueled mainly by unfortunate public statements made by various party leaders that had filled the media in the weeks leading up to the reshuffle, as well as the cyclical upheavals for which the SPLM has come to be known since its inception. Perhaps the public alarm was prompted by memories of the 1991 violent split of the SPLM/A. More importantly, the level of fear was heightened largely by the scope of change for which the public was unprepared and the heavy military deployment on the streets. Juba looked and felt like a garrison town. Indeed, the reaction to the dissolution of government speaks to the need to plan and manage public anxiety in the future when decisions of significant consequences are made.

### **The Catalytic Political Factors for the Reshuffle**

Most of what gave rise to the topical political changes had been speculated in previous Sudd Institute publications; however, to be clear, the whole affair can be best described as party politics gone wild. More precisely, there were four major catalyzing factors that the Sudd Institute considers the primary precipitating factors in the dissolution of the government. These factors include pre-convention political posturing and realignment, foreign pressure and policy shift, rampant corruption, and the mounting public discontent with the performance of both the government and the party.

The political upheavals within the SPLM follow a cyclical pattern that habitually surfaces before SPLM conventions. On more than one occasion the party has had to postpone an extraordinary party conference, which is an essential platform to enable the party convention approve and adopt essential party documents that include the constitution and the manifesto in preparation for the country's 2015 general elections. The postponement is attributed to a purported premature leadership contest within the Political Bureau, which is the executive arm of the party. The fight over leadership led to an ostensibly frustrating paralysis in the party. The leadership contest has not necessarily followed an ideological or a programmatic course, but rather, it is seemingly emanating out of conceited personalities and a thirst for power among the party elites. This posturing follows a parallel pattern exhibited by the same personalities in the 2008 SPLM national convention that featured leadership contests at the party top. Luckily, in 2008, the internal afflictions that had demoralized the convention came to a halt when the convention wisely decided to keep the status quo, both to save the party unity and allow for a successful implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

In light of this, it is conceivable that the current party scuffles had been spurred mainly by similar political penchants. Although the next SPLM national convention does not necessarily typify the same exigencies pertaining to the 2008 national convention, it has similar higher stakes for politicians with leadership ambitions within the party. The heightened divisive environment in party leadership is superficially an antecedent for possible wild contests in the event of the next party convention. Considering politicians being the best of opportunists, they are posturing and sizing each other up both to evaluate their level of influence within the party structures and weighing their chances to ascend to the top. Unfortunately, the posturing seems to have gone overboard and it has apparently morphed into a revulsion affair, with all indications giving the impression that the party is irreparably divided.

One thing, which suggests the party may be seriously divided, is the apparent on-going political realignment. It appears the heightened criticism directed at the party Chairman, Salva Kiir Mayardit, shocked him, leaving him feeling affronted and forsaken by his comrades in the political bureau. In response, he seems to have decided to sever ties with his long time comrades in arms and in government, seemingly building a new coalition both within the party and the government. What appears to be the primary driving element in this realignment is the open challenge presented by Riek Machar and Pagan Amum, both high-ranking party officials, to oust him from the chairmanship in the next party elections. The call to replace the party Chairman appears to have gained traction within the party elites but not to the liking of the party chief.

This challenge is not taken lightly in the Chairman's camp and so in the last government dissolution he tried to achieve two objectives. First, he restructured the government to appear responsive to the popular demand for government reform, attempting to bring an end to the rampant, official corruption. This opportunity allowed him to form a new coalition that includes his remaining few SPLM loyalists, recent National Congress Party (NCP) converts, and politicians from other parties who seem to support his agenda. Second, the government's dissolution has moved power away from his supposed adversaries and given him the opportunity to initiate a restructuring process within the party structures in order to gain full control. Besides reallocating power to his loyalists, the Chairman is taking additional preventive measures to weed out potential spoilers to his re-election bid. As a matter of fact, the purported dissidents have not only being expunged from the leadership, but also reportedly barred from holding public rallies or speaking in public functions. A number of former ministers have been reportedly threatened. A case in point is a recent incident in Yirol West<sup>1</sup> in which a former minister, who is also the area's MP was barred from addressing a public function at a school. Beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Yirol West County Pupils Attacked Commissioner's Office, Published on Sudan Tribune on September 27, 2013. <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article48202>

the physical restrictions, they are also being packaged keenly as the culprits of party and the government malfunctions.

The second related element in this saga seems to be a severe international and regional pressure for South Sudan to shift its foreign policy towards Khartoum. The shift as the Sudd Institute understands is to mend the relations between Juba and Khartoum in order to save the economies of both countries from collapse and to bring permanent peace to both countries. An important ingredient in this endeavor is for South Sudan to break ties with SPLM-North, a proposition that is contrary to the position many core SPLM members hold towards their former comrades in arms. A significant number of influential SPLM leaders still believe in the seemingly dying New Sudan dream, praising their former comrades in South Kordofan and Blue Nile for keeping the vision alive. This professed view, supposedly, makes it difficult to reach a peaceful settlement with Khartoum over a number of issues. For the President, it seems, the regional and international pressure carries a lot of weight. However, this policy swing could not be achieved with the SPLM hardliners in the driving seat, so it is plausible that the President needed a new coalition within the party and the cabinet to execute this new political agenda.

The newly inaugurated government suggests that this plan is well underway. The need for a policy shift coupled with the political realignment process occasioned by the open challenge to the President's re-election ambitions supposedly took precedent in the reshuffle and the formation of the new government. The reshuffle perhaps gave the President an opportunity to tag and purge party officials with leadership aspirations and hardliners within the party. The new cabinet presented an opening for him to bring on board well-wishers and those party members who are seen to toe party hierarchy line.

Another factor leading to the unprecedented government restructuring is corruption. Corruption had grown rampant and become seemingly an irresistible temptation in the government. A number of former ministers and high-ranking public officials have been involved in high-level scandals. The President has long been blamed for inaction against corruption in his government and the issue has drawn unnecessary international attention. The president saw a chance to exonerate himself by blaming his purported renegades as the perpetrators. Evidently, the rhetoric from the President's camp, especially in the recent tour through a number of states, suggests that those who were purged and not reappointed to the new cabinet were corrupt.<sup>2</sup> This view is in line with the President's reported controversial letter to the 75 former ministers and officials, who allegedly had a hand in the 4 billion US dollars loss. The figure is definitely disputed and rightly so, but the admission of corruption by the President is significant, partially explaining the popularity of the recent changes with the public.

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<sup>2</sup> A story reported on September 21 2013 by *Eye on Sudan*, <http://eyeonsudan.eu/?p=4004>, confirmed this statement.

This view, however, gives rise to a number of questions. Chiefly, was the President unaware of the proliferating corrupt practices of the said culprits when he continuously reappointed them to his government before and immediately after independence? Have the President and his new coalition finally found a panacea to end corruption in the government? A deeper look into the rhetoric and actions speaks to the fact that corruption has less to do with the reshuffle, but more to do with the political rivalry in the party as the most imperative reason. Anything else is just a rhetorical dressing to make the change package more attractive.

Lastly, the reshuffle undoubtedly had a lot to do with the pervading apparent dissatisfaction of the general public with the performance of the government and the party since 2005. Although recent International Republican Institute (IRI) polls<sup>3</sup> show that SPLM remains presumably popular, the same polls show that the party was popular for only one reason; that is, the achievement of independence. The government and the party both scored miserably low in the areas of governance, service delivery, and security provision. This level of discontent is in line with a similar revelation found when the party reportedly dispatched the top members of the political bureau in the middle of 2012 to congratulate and thank the public for their undying support during the liberation struggle. The visit predictably exposed a deeply seated dissatisfaction of the general public with the party; essentially, the public felt that the party has lost its vision, was corrupt, and has failed to deliver much needed services over the years.

The public outrage seems to have caught the party leaders off guard and apparently the elites began to search for a culprit to whom blame can be apportioned. The blaming game triggered the current political turmoil within the party. The President seems to be getting most out of the current crisis in two ways: he wants to distance himself from the alleged party failure by branding the dissidents as trouble makers who failed the party and the country. Second, he is purportedly trying to brand and package these dissenters as disloyal to the party and threatened to expel<sup>4</sup> those found guilty of bickering. If he succeeds in pushing out a number of high profile party officials, it is assumed that he will take proprietorship of the party with his loyalists and probably ensures the security of his job. The question that remains to be speculated upon is whether the emerging coalition would have the legitimacy to carry the party torch forward with the same level of popularity. The majority of the former ministers, including Deng Alor, Kosti Manibe, Nhial Deng Nhial, Oyai Deng Ajak, and Pagan Amum just to name a few, have been the face of the party.

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<sup>3</sup>IRI Public Opinion Polls released on July 19, 2013. <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-poll-majority-south-sudanese-believe-independence-has-made-their-l>

<sup>4</sup>Kiir threatens to expel SPLM members over bickering as reported in the *Sudan Tribune* on September 23, 2013  
<http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article48149>.

## The State of the Party (SPLM)

Following the dissolution and the formation of the new government, it was widely speculated that Dr. Machar and a number of disgruntled SPLM ministers would join forces in the parliament and present a formidable fighting bloc within the SPLM caucus, intending to weaken the President and frustrate his policies. The assumption is that these individuals would, out of desperation, forge an expedient political alliance. This speculation generated a sense of disquiet within the President's camp, delaying the Vice-President's appointment. As well, the interviews we conducted revealed that the Parliament's Speakership was going to be contested within SPLM's several factions. The fear was fueled mostly by what unfolded during the vetting process, in which the parliament rejected the nomination of Mr. Telar Ring Deng. Mr. Deng was a nominee for the Minister of Justice and a former Presidential Legal Adviser. Though Deng's academic credentials and experience posed concern, the whole vetting saga was marred with political vengeance against him. He is believed by most party officials to have been the architect behind the reshuffle and equally suspected to have influenced most presidential decisions.

The reported plan of Dr. Machar and his camp in putting up a fight in the parliament, if it ever was meant to materialize, was eventually foiled. When the President appointed the former Speaker of the Assembly, James Wani Igga as his Vice-President, he threatened the parliament to approve the appointment or risk the closure of the legislative body. Faced with the choice between loitering on the streets and pleasing the President, the timid parliament obviously acquiesced and delivered as per the President's directives, purportedly using an un-procedural parliamentary vote to approve the appointment. The election of the new Speaker followed a parallel pattern.

Having lost a chance to fight back in the parliament, the fight now moved to the party structures. From what the Sudd Institute has gathered, the Political Bureau (PB) is overly divided and it may no longer be able to sit for a meeting. It is also reported that the President has lost a great deal of support in the PB, perhaps explaining his preference to bypass it and call for the National Liberation Council's (NLC) meeting<sup>5</sup>. Though this is in clear violation of the party's constitution, the NLC's meeting will be convened to pass the documents. In the NLC meeting, it is possible the President, in his capacity as the Chairman of the party, could dissolve the PB and form a new one prior to the planned national convention in 2014. This proposition was hinted at recently in an interview with a member of the party secretariat. The argument is that everyone's term expired in August 2013 and that the Chairman has the power to make the changes in the interest of the party. Alternatively, since a new team will be elected in the next convention, the President may choose to leave the current body in place, but might do business with the party

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<sup>5</sup> SPLM National Liberation Council set to meet in October. Reported in the *Sudan Tribune* on September 25, 2013  
<http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article48183>

caucus in the parliament and depending on what happens in the next NLC meeting, he might also do business with the NLC and ignore the political bureau. The NLC might see a change of the Secretary General with someone to act until the next convention.

Drawing from the above scenario, it seems that Dr. Machar and the so-called “Garang Boys” have decided to remain and fight within the party. This position is strategic because the party remains popular and as such, worth the fight. The problem with this approach, however, is that it prevents them from campaigning or planning anything, other than waiting for the national convention, which is too close to the elections, leaving them not enough time to compete in a new platform, if they eventually choose to do so. For the President, his preferred option would be for these individuals to leave the party voluntarily and form their own party. This will first of all make him the lone contestant at the SPLM convention, but it will also give him the time to brand the breakaway party as not revolutionary in comparison with the SPLM. The decision of Dr. Machar to remain and fight within the party particularly makes the next national convention contentious and worrying for the President. The advantage for the President, however, is that if Dr. Machar and those of Pagan Amum remain party members, they must toe the line or risk being expelled from the party one by one. Another advantage that the President has is that he is still the chief executive and he may lure a number of dissenting members back to his camp with his powers to appoint and appease.

It is difficult to predict what exactly will happen in the next national convention, but a number of variables remain relevant including the possibility that the current individuals may remain adamantly opposed to the President and the party might eventually split. Both camps will try and fight for control of the party, but it is obvious that one group will lose this fight and if that happens, the losing side may do one of two things. First, it might actually try and destroy the party with the hope that a new competitive platform may emerge. If it is unable to destroy the SPLM, the group may break off and form a new SPLM faction. Once this happens, what will likely ensue is a contest over which SPLM faction is more legitimate. The split of the party may help shape the country for the better, introducing a more pronounced political competition and positive influence.

It is also conceivable that the party may not actually split; perhaps the President will reach out to the disgruntled individuals and reach some sort of political settlement that allows the party to move forward united. It will not surprise us if the party comes out in the 2014 convention unified behind one presidential candidate, presumably President Kiir. However, the chances of such association are really slim and it might take a real miracle to do so. Split is more likely, perhaps even sooner after the NLC meeting depending on what and how it is discussed.

One critical element in this fight over the party is the role of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). In the last elections, SPLM used its historical relations with the SPLA to its advantage. In a number of constituencies where elections were

considered competitive, SPLA soldiers were dressed in police uniforms and were instructed to ensure that SPLM emerged victorious; after all, it was the SPLM against the enemy. Unfortunately, this tactic will not work in the next elections. SPLA is not an army of one person and no longer has the north to fight; it is a national army and the contestants will be South Sudanese, former SPLA generals who may also wield influence over different sections of the army. Whatever the case may be, SPLA remains an important factor.

Another important factor that may decide the outcome of this party contests are the youth. South Sudanese youth believe in the SPLM and its vision. Judging from the popularity some of the long standing SPLM leaders have, it seems plausible to say that the youth are much closer in their thinking with the so-called “Garang Boys” than they are with the President’s or the former Vice President’s views. If the contest were over personalities and loyalty to the movement, it would be an easy win for the “Garang Boys” among the youth. This supposed view could be contested, but some of the youth the Sudd Institute interviewed seem worried by the party’s poor performance under President Kiir.

Finally, ethnicity is certainly a deciding factor. If South Sudanese see the party fight taking any ethnic lines, people will stand behind their persons. In the absence of ideological orientation, people tend to vote along ethnic lines as we have seen recently in Kenya. This depends largely on how the politicians manage the political process. So far, one can proudly say the politicians have managed the process very well, with limited appeals to ethnic sentiments. It is not guaranteed to remain this way, but the country is better off with politics restrained to the domain of ideological influence. It is the ethnic aspect of party politics that is likely to lead to violence and that is where much of the fear is concentrated.

## **Conclusion**

SPLM is an important political organization in the lives of the South Sudanese people. It led the struggle for liberty and freedom over the last thirty years, which culminated in the declaration of independence in 2011. It is the ruling party in the government of South Sudan, with people genuinely concerned about its internal dysfunction. The party is currently at a critical juncture and its internal problems could potentially destabilize the country. The situation can only get worse if the party plans to entrench itself into power. That is, the party’s leadership will remain highly contested and the behavior of winners and losers could tilt the balance in one direction or the other. Second, the party appears to have lost its intellectual edge and for a long time, the party has not been able to roll out a new policy direction informed by the reality of governance. The party remains idealistic despite nearly ten years in power, and lives on memories of the liberation time and not on new innovative practices. In the absence of the arch-enemy, which was certainly the uniting factor during the liberation struggle, the desire to amass wealth, and the lust for power at the expense of the common South Sudanese seem to have



unfortunately become the preoccupation of the party elites. This political trajectory clearly appears to threaten the long-term viability of the once celebrated movement. To ensure the internal SPLM complications do not degenerate into national crises, the Sudd Institute recommends the following:

- The SPLM leaders should keep party politics civil, free, program-oriented, and fend off any temptation to invoke tribal or ethnic sentiments.
- The political crisis in the party is deeply rooted in the party's incomplete democratization and transformation process. The party needs to transform and democratize to prevent its collapse.
- The 2009 SPLM congresses and primaries were democratic at the grassroots, but the party leaders defrauded the process at the top. The party needs to open up every position for free contest and allow its membership to choose freely the next party candidates for all election posts in the primaries.
- To mitigate the political crisis, the next National Liberation Council meeting should be held in a manner that is seen politically as transparent and democratic so that its resolutions are acceptable to all the party factions.
- If for any reason any person or individual decides to break off from the party, it should be done in a manner that preserves national unity and tranquility.

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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.

### **About the Author**

Abraham Awolich is a founding member of the Sudd Institute and currently runs administration and finance department. Awolich is a policy analyst and his research interests are in public administration, development, decentralization, NGO and public management, budgeting and public finance, community development, organizational justice and all poverty related issues.