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Weekly Review

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Restructuring the South Sudanese Federal Government: Political or Human Factor?

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On July 23, 2013, President Salva Kiir Mayardit issued some of the most courageous political/administrative decrees of all time, relieving the nation's longstanding vice president of his post, suspending the chief administrator, the Secretary General of the ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), dissolving the executive branch of the government, and restructuring the federal ministries. Previously, the president had issued a series of orders suspending two federal ministers and his office administrators over alleged financial theft and dismissing democratically elected state governors. Of these recent orders, notwithstanding the constitutional test some may face, the most admired by the public is the restructuring of the ministries, partly because of the perceived positive influence of a smaller government on social accountability and the efficiency of a smaller and leaner government. The decree reduced the federal ministries from 29 to 19. Of course, like majority of the population, President Kiir believes that downsizing the government at the national level may enhance service delivery at the grassroots, validating ensuing public delights. President Kiir subsequently pleaded with the state governors to follow suit. Undoubtedly, this move excited hopes in the population that suffers serious under-funding for development and social services, often with federal institutions spending more than states or counties. Similarly, the shakeups are praiseworthy in that they may eventually help streamline a system that is currently administered by a great deal of venal politicians. Interestingly, the whole affair surfaced in the wake of a politically heightened disgruntlement within the ruling party, suggesting that the just-induced changes may have not been a product of genuinely coordinated vision/program in response to citizenry's aspirations or pleas. Perhaps being politically vindictive and emotional risk being characteristic of the presidential verdict.

Likely lack of pre-coordinated, consultative and systematic restructuring of the government is palpably evidenced in the first decree, which left out the national ministry of health. This is even more salient in the two executive orders that followed, one concerned with the nomination of ministers and their deputies and

the other centered upon the creation of additional ministries. Guided by a clearly gender-sensitive constitution, the president surprisingly failed to meet the 25 percent women quota in his first ministerial nominations, birthing an outcry among women. With justifiable demands from South Sudanese women, the president was later forced to reverse his earlier decision and to restructure the ministries, instituting 2 more, forming a total of 21 ministries, two of which are ad hoc in the presidency. This latest decision, unfortunately, caused disappointment in the public, rightly so because ensuring gender balance does not necessarily require establishing more institutions, as the increase in the number of ministries does not guarantee an increase in the percentage that should go to women.

This review responds mainly to the presidential decree on the restructuring of the government, focusing primarily on the nature of the decision, the meaning of the reduced size of the government, and the political implications of the second decree.

A decision to restructure the government was long overdue. For the last two years, the author has penned several opinions advocating for lean government in South Sudan. Indeed, the presidency has been quite receptive, publicly voicing the same concern and expressing interest to immediately undertake deserved changes. After independence, in a decisive move, the president issued an executive order reducing the size of the federal ministries to 29, from 32. To the public, the intervention was not necessarily sufficient, but there was a sense of appreciation for the leadership's demonstrated political will. The minimal efforts were partly owed to the council of ministers and the ruling party's resistance, consultations with close aides of the presidency suggest. Normally, the resistance is to be expected, as the reconfiguration deals with employment. Still, the recent attempt to execute this change may have been politically clouded. Though carrying out such a pursuit through the council of ministers was met with a great deal of resistance, a genuine plan would have considered parliament's opinion, with more thought-through structures suggested. Essentially, the political climate under which this decision was made and the blunders it harbors make politics a driving factor.

A lean government, in the view of so many, constitutes that which supposedly caters to the governed. There has been a growing interest among South Sudanese to have their government reduced, with different people recommending different sizes. In addition, catering to the governed through a reasonably reduced federal government does not necessarily mean cutting lose all the institutions perceived to be redundant, though a useful public entity should have recognized functions. Some of these entities could be taken to the states and counties, for instance, rural development institutions. Existing knowledge illustrates that the latter is thus far not instituted. Despite the public being jubilant in response to the order, little do they understand the limited gains the new structures offer. Surely, the public saves about 3.5 M South Sudanese Pounds in salaries and allowances per year by firing 7 ministers and their deputies. However, the entire workforce of the supposedly defunct institutions remains in the public payroll, drawing salaries and related benefits as usual. To achieve sufficient levels of savings for development, this

indicates that a socially significant downsizing constitutes laying off majority or all of the affected public servants. In the absence of this intervention, the whole affair boils down to a political exhibition. But commencing with the size of the institutional constituents is a good point of departure.

Though the popular sentiment in response to the first executive restructuring order was positive, with the citizenry feeling more valued and regarded in crafting the direction of the country, this feeling was soon shattered the night the president established additional institutions, reversing his initial decision. The second decree that increased the size of the government jeopardizes the quality of previous decision, a disappointment to the voters. The president's fluidity in his decisions leads to loss of confidence in him, said a gathered tribe of South Sudanese youth. Indeed, that the public might be losing confidence in the government is reinforced by the perception that over 50 percent of South Sudanese think that the country is headed in the wrong direction (IRI, 2013). The president's vacillating position and the extent to which decisions of critical importance are made have constantly stirred concern in the public, particularly as many of the government's decisions get haphazardly formulated. For instance, the oil shutdown was exceptionally emotional, with the council's communiqué citing South Sudanese as being ready to suffer potential consequences because, apparently, they are used to hardships.

It is understandable how many interest groups the president has to deal with, but making firm decisions is characteristic of quality leadership. It is also a serious necessity in staying the challenge and garnering trust and support from common persons. President Bush, for example, made some serious mistakes in his leadership, but remained trusted partly because he stood firmly by those decisions he made. Buying into personalized political pressures isolates the citizens, indeed one of the numerous ways a politician can dash people's aspirations, hopes, and expectations.

Overall, the initiative to reduce the size of the government is imperative. However, moving forward, the president and the entire leadership may consider observing the following policy prescriptions. Effective policy interventions are those that get well studied, with clearly delineated expected outcomes and how to measure them. The government of South Sudan, since its official inception in 2006, has been sorely plagued by lack of substantively informed planning. Poor planning is politically embarrassing and seriously detrimental for development. With a substantively developed exercise, for instance, meeting 25 percent of women's constitutional mandate (5 ministers) would have been ensured within the 19 ministries, avoiding the embarrassing moment of revisiting the decision. Likewise, the national ministry of health would have not missed the list. Furthermore, there is strong need for such decisions to move away from just meeting the obligations of filling public office and more into setting up the programs and plans that require serious technical knowledge and timely implementation. For instance, with a clear development or service delivery agenda, one that has been well studied and sufficiently disseminated to the public, the appointment of people to execute this plan would be more professional and less political.

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