



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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The Dialogue Brief

March 31, 2017

South Sudan's National Dialogue: What it should be and why it should be supported

The Sudd Institute

Summary

President Salva Kiir Mayardit announced in December 2016 a national dialogue program that supposedly enables the citizens to collectively debate the future of their distraught country. The debate includes how to resolve the conflict, respond to a growing humanitarian crisis, and address the enduring ills of governance in the country. This announcement quickly triggered a range of reactions. In this dialogue brief, the Sudd Institute examines these reactions, as presented in various forms and settings. The brief discusses what the dialogue should be and why it deserves support.

When the President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir Mayardit, announced in December 2016 that his government was going to invite all South Sudanese to hold a national dialogue, he appeared comprehensive in what he thought were the issues the country needed to collectively debate. These included the raging conflict and political violence, humanitarian crisis, questions of governance, and the politics of unity or exclusion, the economy, poverty and the widening economic disparities between elite and the citizens—discussing all of which amounts to discussing the future of the whole country. In other words, the President was thinking that the country had come to a fork in the road, one being the continuation of violence and the pursuit of war, which he reckoned was not a desirable option; and the other being the preparation of a political ground that is open to all the people of South Sudan to engage in a conversation about the variety of challenges confronting their young state. In his recognition that the unity of the country was in peril, the President wanted South Sudanese to reflect on the questions of governance, the kind of South Sudan the people envisioned and wanted, how to achieve it and most of all, what the South Sudanese really think of each other and about the things they have done to one another along ethnic, class, regional, gender, generational, and authority lines.

The President's speech on December 14th was very clear in its recognition of the need for a mutual understanding and commitment between the citizens and the state, the importance of assuring the citizens that the state is obligated to protect them and the citizen submitting to the rule of law, with a relationship that is transparently moderated by public institutions. This was really one of the first and rare occasions that the head of state had starred the South Sudanese and their brief history as an independent state straight in the face and asked them what they wanted, expecting them to take their time to converse and come up with the answer to that fundamental question.

The backdrop to the **National Dialogue** is the August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (ARCISS), which is the basis for the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) currently in office. President Kiir's seriousness about the dialogue was exemplified further during the "National Day of Prayer" that took place on March 10, 2016 in Juba and in which he poured his heart out seeking forgiveness for his role in the country's crisis.

This announcement quickly triggered multiple reactions, most of which ranged from jubilation to conditional acceptance, cautious optimism, doubt about its motives, trepidation, and outright opposition. In this dialogue brief, the Sudd Institute examines these reactions, as presented in public forums, written positions, online discussions and social media debates, and grouping them into three broad positions.

The first group is the one that positively embraces the national dialogue as the only available opportunity for this country to exit from its current crisis. This category involves the largest swath of South Sudanese. Their acceptance of this call is not a blanket endorsement of it as if it can solve the crisis overnight, but one that many people reckon would take time, patience, resources, leveling of the playing field, tolerance of dissenting views, building of trust and assurance of flexibility in the way it is conducted. In other words, they see it as a test to the commitment of the government and that "we cannot know its viability until we have tried it," in the words of one supporter of the national dialogue initiative.

The second group is that of skeptics or outright opponents to it. This group is made up of a significant number of opposition movements, such as a faction of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLA/M-IO), the former political detainees who were detained in the wake of the civil war in 2013 and later released, the Democratic Change Movement, People's Democratic Movement and others. There were also some doubting voices within the civil society movement who questioned the timeliness of the process, especially in view that the war had not sufficiently stopped to create a suitable environment for this kind of process. Some prominent political figures in the opposition like Riek Machar Teny, Lam Akol Ajawin, Peter Adwok Nyaba and some of the former political detainees, who are all opposed to the government of President Kiir, surmise that the President's call for dialogue was nothing more than a time-buying gimmick, to prolong his tenure in

office or to deflect attention away from the government's failure to end the war. Other skeptics include some communities of the South Sudanese Diaspora, especially among the Nuer and Equatorians in the United States of America, Canada, and in Australia, refugees in the neighboring countries, citizens who are unhappy with Kiir's government due to their own negative encounters with the state, and those directly affected by the war, especially the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who see any attempted solutions that are short of removing Kiir as non-starters. In sum, the opponents to the current Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) have painted the initiative as one shrouded in many suspicious motives. They insist that it is not possible to hold dialogue in the midst of a violent conflict and that without ceasefire, safety and freedom from fear and wanton political environment, a dialogue would be confined to some areas that are more accessible, defeating the very idea.

The third category of reactions is that of the international community, which was at first skeptical but has since moderated its position to one of cautious support for it. The main sources of skepticism among the internationals, be the United Nations, individual governments, regional organizations or individual diplomats representing their countries in South Sudan, relate to questions of inclusivity, particularly with regards to the involvement of political figures in exile, transparency of the process, the continued military actions in some parts of the country and doubts about both the logistical capacity of the government and the political commitment of the ruling elite. They have also mentioned that the role of the president as patron is a concern in view of the fact that the government he leads is party to the conflict.

On the face of it, these opinions may appear opposed, but are in fact speaking of ways to propel a great national dialogue. If the advisors to the President as patron of the national dialogue, the steering committee and the secretariat, engage with the opposing views and use them to ensure that the process is flexible, that it is inclusive, independent and covering all corners of the country and its diaspora communities, it is possible to assuage the fears of these various constituencies. If all the South Sudanese speak with honesty about what ails their country, listen to all the pain that so many of them have endured and are willing to tolerate differing views on the violent conflicts, ways to resolve them, how to get justice and the nature of the state and how to govern it, the national dialogue provides an unprecedented opportunity for them to imagine and work for the kind of South Sudan that they all know they deserve and aspire for. Creating a political environment that is inclusive would go a long way in returning lasting peace to South Sudan. Understandably, the President's position as patron may appear suspicious at first, but such arrangement obligates the government to implement the resolutions of the national dialogue.

Apart from the challenges listed above, there are two major potential stumbling blocks to the national dialogue. The first issue concerns continued military

operations. These do not allow people to trust the sincerity of this call, no matter who is engaging in them. For its part, as the entity calling for dialogue, the government has to avoid being seen as contradictory, talking about dialogue while still waging a war. We think the government could do its part by declaring a unilateral ceasefire and challenge the armed opposition groups to do the same. Embarking upon the dialogue itself could enhance government's credibility towards this process.

The second obstacle is the position of the opposition leaders who are outside the country, especially if they manage to galvanize the international opinion against the initiative. The opposition groups have spoken of their security inside the country should they be required to return home for the dialogue, with some of them suggesting that the process be moderated by a more neutral person or group with the capacity to hold some of the dialogue sessions outside the country. They also have a different view of what a national dialogue is, seeing the national dialogue as a way to renegotiate power sharing. There are two problems with these views. One is that holding the dialogue in a foreign country and moderated by a foreign entity would take the "national" out of the "national dialogue" and with it the ownership by South Sudanese. The other is that national dialogues are not political negotiations and allowing the political class to veer the dialogue toward that direction would confine the process to the elite and would crowd out the grassroots voices, and of all other ordinary citizens. If onboard, the opposition should not see the national dialogue as a route to public office in the same way that a negotiated political settlement might be.

In summary, the national dialogue process should be envisioned as a people-to-people process, as within and between communities, between citizens and the state, among the elite of various political shades and above all, as a process that starts at the basic level of administrative units, all through the various levels, where each level would send its delegates and resolutions to a level above it, up to the national dialogue at the top. What it will need is a clear and honest identification of stakeholders, mapping of the various conflicts that have engulfed the country for the past decade if not more, listing of grievances, sticking to the principles and goals, credible management and documentation of the whole process. The national dialogue has to be independent, minimizing the influence of the various political contenders, and most of all, it has to start building the trust of the people, that this is a genuine initiative. To achieve the trust of citizen in the process, it has to be transparent from the beginning, through media coverage and discussion forums that update the public about what has been achieved and what obstacles have stood in the way.

Given the context of South Sudan, the best outcome of such a process would be citizens' realization that the wars they fight along ethnic lines are essentially wars fought on behalf of ethnic elites and that the pain these wars inflict mostly affects the ordinary people than it affects the top leaders. To check these wars, the local

communities have to develop ability to withdraw their backing to their ethnic contending leaders. Once it kicks off, the National Dialogue initiative would maintain its flexibility along the way, dropping whatever might block it and taking on what could enhance it, and all the while, keeping the public informed about where the process stands and inviting more views on what has been or not achieved at different stages.

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.