



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

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Regional Conferences in South Sudan Are Imperative

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Justice Deng Biong has triggered an opportune and a healthy discourse on the relevance of regional conferences based on the colonial division of the South into three administrative provinces of Bahr el-Ghazal, Equatoria, and Upper Nile. Like a good legal scholar, Justice Deng Biong has based his argument on the Transitional Constitution of South Sudan of 2011 (TCSS-2011), arguing against regional conferences. I would not follow his model, but rather use three fundamentals—nation-building, democratic transformation, and good governance—of political economy in support of the regional conferences.

Nation-building project should be the first order of business for a new nation. The first argument in favor of regional conferences or regional blocs is anchored on the concept of a nation building. South Sudan has had, since the Juba Conference of June 1947, founded its unity against the north on geographical and administrative division based on the three provinces. These three provinces created, in turn, the southern social, economic, and political character symbolized by Africanness on the one hand, and resistance to Arabism on the other. This geographical-based character has been instrumental in making the people of South Sudan achieve their freedom, liberty, and independence. And they would be the pillars of a South Sudanese nation-building project.

In fact, regionalism is important in the process of nation-building, for it subordinates “tribalism” to higher regional goals within the overall framework of national prosperity, liberty, human dignity, and freedom. It also facilitates social harmony and political stability through compromises rather than violent confrontation over the national agenda. For instance, the call by Greater Equatoria for federalism as a system of governance in South Sudan would require some trade offs, say with Greater Bahr el-Ghazal, which has resolved to support President Salva Kiir Mayardit in the 2015 Presidential contest. That is, Greater Bahr el-Ghazal can support federalism to be stated unambiguously in the permanent constitution of South Sudan in return of the Greater Equatoria’s support for President Salva Kiir Mayardit’s bid for the presidency in 2015.

Regionalism is a critical phase in the process of democratic transformation. The two greater regions have essentially set the national agenda with respect to the structure of South Sudanese state on the one hand, and on the question of leadership on the other. It is Greater Upper Nile that must come up with its own national agenda through which it would

have to bargain either with Greater Equatoria or Greater Bahr el-Ghazal. Greater Upper Nile is paradoxically in a delicate position. All the militias that are destabilizing South Sudan are found there. Moreover, four of the five potential challengers of President Salva Kiir Mayardit in 2015 come from Greater Upper Nile, including Dr. Riek Machar Teny, Cde. P'agan Amum Okiech, and Madam Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior—all from the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). In this regard, Greater Upper Nile has to put its house in order first for it to participate effectively and positively in addressing the two items—**federalism and leadership**—in the national agenda that have been tabled respectively by Greater Equatoria and Greater Bahr el-Ghazal.

Good governance is a function of leadership. The daughters and sons of Greater Upper Nile have a national obligation to first embark on convening their own regional conference to tackle the two critical issues of: a) security, which affects the country as a whole; and b) leadership/unity of the region with wider implication to South Sudan. Then, join the other two regions in debating the national agenda items of federalism and leadership. Greater Upper Nile has a golden opportunity to forge a national consensus on a nation-building process that takes into account the interests/concerns of Greater Equatoria and Greater Bahr el-Ghazal as follows:

1. Support federalism as the most appropriate structure of South Sudanese state, since the system of decentralization stipulated in the TCSS-2011 is essentially a federal system as evidenced by the fact that the ten (10) states of South Sudan have their respective constitutions, legislative assemblies, and executives. This system advocates the sharing of national sovereignty between the states and the national (i.e. federal) government. Moreover, it enhances social contract between the South Sudanese state and people of South Sudan through their respective communities, payams, counties, states, and Greater Regions. A solid foundation for social contract in a multi-ethnic society is federalism, which in turn strengthens a spirit of nationalism and patriotism.
2. Give conditional agreement with Greater Bahr el-Ghazal for President Salva Kiir Mayardit to complete a transitional period that ends on July 9, 2018 without him seeking further terms of office. This would require the amendment of TCSS-2011 to allow a full transitional period of five (5) years starting this year. It should call for President Mayardit to immediately embark on a program of comprehensive reform of: a) the SPLM General secretariat; b) civil service; c) security sector; d) executive; e) judiciary; and f) economic management. This would also call for political parties to develop themselves and be ready to compete with the SPLM in 2018. Moreover, the permanent constitution must be enacted, with the population census being subsequently conducted so as to allow determination of constituencies in a more transparent manner. An extended transitional period would allow the daughters and sons of Greater Upper Nile to restore stability to the region on the one hand, and to have a unified leadership on the other. Greater Upper Nile would in this way be able to actively bargain with the other two regions for the leadership of South Sudan comes the year 2018.

In conclusion, the current regionalism might be redundant constitutionally and incoherent institutionally, but it could lay the foundation for a viable South Sudanese state. I was in the United States of America (USA) during the Reagan Administration when members of the US House of Representatives from Southern States used to vote as a bloc (Republicans and Democrats) representing the southern interest. Moreover, regionalism does not fit the definition of civic association nor political grouping, even though the bargain it creates is seemingly effective. One could then argue that the only way it could work is that it would need defining as a civic association bargaining for issues that would prevent war and build confidence among the three greater regions to reach particular beneficial compromises. This will not take away the belief that these conferences are more political than social. But, they are necessary, though not sufficient in the process of nation-building, democratic transformation, and good governance.

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

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