



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Truth and Reconciliation in South Sudan

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Weeks ago, the president of the Republic of South Sudan issued a decree forming a committee responsible for the truth and reconciliation exercise in the country. Some people in the country welcomed the move, though others say it took too long, but considered it a positive step to bringing understanding, healing, and unity among the deeply fractured communities of South Sudan. The frequency of tribal clashes has increased over the years, particularly after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The increasing level of ethnic violence in recent periods in South Sudan has left many South Sudanese and friends wondering if the country will ever stabilize anytime soon. In some cases the ethnic conflicts have transformed and grown in spell and magnitude. For instance, between 2006 and now, thousands of lives have been lost in tribal clashes in Jonglei State. These ethnic cleavages, if history is any guide, are a proximal manifestation of brutish experience of a long war, which consequently wrecked social bonds, strained ethnic relations, and shattered communal affinities in South Sudan.

Before and after the CPA, several peace and reconciliation activities have been carried out, with the 1999 Wunlit initiative as prominent. As well, the then Government of Southern Sudan instituted peace and healing programming under its peace ministry and commission. Some of these activities are vital in setting stage for regaining communal trust and coexistence, but have not been either encompassing or effective. With attainment of sovereignty, it is essential to address war-borne historical animosities among South Sudanese. One of the paradigms, which might prove effective, is truth and reconciliation campaign, that which the government seems to be presently advancing already. This may help heal the wounds that South Sudanese communities experienced in the liberation process.

As a critical step toward realizing stability in the country, such an initiative could be promising, thanks to the republic's vice president. This week, the Sudd Institute reviews popular feeling and the process underlying this newly inaugurated reconciliation initiative, and suggests probable insights into effectively promoting it.

The war has caused horrifying injustices, humiliation, and enfeebled communal relationships in the South Sudanese communities. Resultant ethnic hostilities only drained the community of needed trust and understanding, equally planting seeds of hatred and disunity in the then Sudan's region. Matters are made worse as many people suffered such injustices without a legal means to turn to for amends and to have their dignity restored. The complication with this fact is that those South Sudanese who might have caused harm to each other are now living in the same neighborhood, sadly with bitter memories, which have indisputable potential to disturb peace. Some communities or individuals continue to cite certain experiences and with whom, further souring peaceful coexistence in a post-war society.

In response to this brutish history, the government has formed a committee on national truth and reconciliation programming. Since the news broke, the citizens, enthused and approving, have been quite attentive to the committee's activities. A number of consultative meetings, miniature conferences, and planning workshops have been conducted, probably with the aim of figuring out exactly how the exercise should be carried out. However, some of the news coming out of these meetings, miniature conferences, and planning sessions have only presented mixed messages, causing suspicions as to the underlying intention of the program. Fears are running high among the citizens that the truth and reconciliation process is becoming politicized and that the committee is packed with individuals who themselves deserve to be reconciled with other individuals or communities.

The fear that the initiative is verging on politicization is real and unsettling. And for the reconciliation efforts and processes to be credible, inclusive, and successful in the country, there are a number of factors, which may need considering. First, preceding instituting this initiative should have been analyses and surveys of prior regional experiences, essentially to evaluate what kinds of opportunities they present for South Sudan's context. Similar efforts have been undertaken in South Africa, Rwanda, and even more recently, Kenya. Rather than being hastened into engaging the communities, the committee should have primarily commenced with this crucial phase. Not considering regional experiences in reconciling South Sudanese communities only means a squandered opportunity, and a recipe for unfavorable odds toward credibility and success.

Second, a non-politicized nation-wide awareness campaign has to be undertaken to inform the citizens on the merits of the initiative. More specifically, the common person deep inside the village needs to understand the program and the role of the newly created committee. Without sincerely laying the groundwork that is people-centered, the initiative easily risks being perceived as another fraudulent political endeavor aimed at self-promotion within the government. Likewise, the initiative may be viewed as another economic venture for politicians, more like the *Dura Transaction*.

Third, a truth and reconciliation sub-committee must be instituted to hear the grievances and flights of all communities. Healing begins here and people must own and profess their history in order for the government to structure encompassing and effective reconciliation programs. This allows communities to air their historical or current grievances, a technique that is generally proved to have sourced communal or individual psychological relief.

Finally, hearing from the victims and perpetrators is not enough. The truth and reconciliation sub-committee must be empowered to administer justice in cases where retribution is deemed imminent. Where necessary, the government should consider reparation responses, while simultaneously engaging conflicting communities in dialogues aimed at instilling forgiveness, trust, and peace.

Conclusively, an effective reconciliation initiative in South Sudan needs distancing from politics, vanity, and commercialization. Its implementation requires a robust understanding of similar regional activities as a useful point of departure for South Sudan's context. Lastly, the initiative must be people-driven.

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 Authors

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