



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

P. O. Box 34, Juba, South Sudan • Tel: +211 (0)956 305 780  
Email: [thesudd.institute@gmail.com](mailto:thesudd.institute@gmail.com) • [www.suddinstitute.org](http://www.suddinstitute.org)

ISSUES PAPER NO. 1  
AUGUST 2012

## Insecurity and Ethnic Violence in South Sudan: Existential Threats to the State?

*By Jok Madut Jok*

*Since South Sudan* gained independence a year ago, things have moved very fast, mainly with negative developments overshadowing any positive gains of independence. A few household and community-level assessments and individual opinion polls on political, economic, and social situations have all indicated that the euphoria about the sense of freedom that came with the declaration of independence may be starting to wane across the country.

The citizens' expectations and aspirations about what independence constitutes in their lives seem dashed, in terms of service delivery, government's fiscal responsibility, political unity, security, respect for human rights and civil liberties. However, gauging by the debates in the media, both online and in public forums held in Juba and other urban centers, there appears to be some recognition by civil society associations and by many ordinary citizens, that one year of independence could not have been enough to erase the upheavals of many decades of destruction caused by north-south war. Yet, others still argue that creating a sound number of policies and programs would have resulted in significant progress toward provision of the most basic peace dividends had the national government been more focused on the citizens. Of all the programs most expected to urgently embark upon, the provision of security has been at the top of the list, but it is now proven the most daunting for the government to satisfy. That this most anticipated reward for peace and independence remains for the large part unmet means that there has been very little to rejoice in, especially for the rural communities who are most affected by violence.

Rampant insecurity in its multiple forms across the country seems to present the most ubiquitous threat to the future viability of the young state, the aggression from Khartoum, the economic problems, and the inheritance of a dilapidated infrastructure notwithstanding. Insecurity represents an existential threat because it appears to pose greater long-term consequences than the other challenges that a new country faces but should overcome in due course. It presents long-term

challenges because many of its multiple forms have the tendency to take ethnic shape, and South Sudan being such an ethnically diverse country, insecurity that adopts ethnic fault lines is likely to lead to erosion of the kind of political unity that had been sustained by liberation wars and opposition to north Sudan. In other words, a threat of ethnic disunity is a threat to the nation's existence.

The security of individual and property has been made difficult to achieve due to a variety of factors. Chief among these is the ethnic violence that has engulfed much of South Sudan since the days before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the north-south war. There has been a great deal of analysis of the causes of ethnic violence conducted by journalists and social scientists from other countries. Yet, much of this analysis appears to miss the crux of the matter and instead has focused on what seems exotic instead of the more nuanced explanation such an important matter deserves. For example, cattle rustling, which has plagued many communities in all the seven cattle herding states of the republic, has been attributed to the rising bride wealth, an explanation which bears very little empirical evidence from the communities affected (Harragin, 2012 and Sommers and Schwartz, 2011). Others view that the lack of ethnic representation in the governments also undermines ethnic cohesion (NDI, 2011).

Another source of insecurity has been the legacy of the protracted war with what has now become the rump state, the Republic of Sudan. When the CPA was signed, what seems to have gotten lost in the negotiations and with the implementation of the final document was the most dominant characteristic of African civil wars, which is that they are always multi-layered, with the bigger war appearing more visible and perhaps seen as more deadly while other smaller wars rage on overshadowed by the bigger civil war but with equal consequences. In the war between north and south Sudan, before independence, tribal militias were formed and had been involved in Khartoum's attempts to fight the south by proxy, and these militias have left behind strained tribal relations, some of which continue to present the new country with a serious disarmament challenges. The same was true for the attempts by the southern opposition to create its own militias to defend their communities or the occasional deployment of some units of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) to respond to pockets of resistance by some ethnic groups to the SPLA's agenda, where many excesses took place in what escalated at times into a south-south confrontation. These issues were not resolved by the settlement of the bigger war and have, therefore, continued to subtract from the gains of the peace agreement and the independence. In other words, there was no mechanism in the CPA to tackle these communal differences, nor did they form a core and urgent policy matters of the post-war reconciliation and peace-building.



Another source of insecurity is the very armed forces that are set up to defend the nation and whose professionalism in their dealings with the civilians has been a subject of much commentary and critique. Reports abound about the heavy-handedness of the army in situations of disarmament, in responses to outbreak of tribal violence, and even in circumstances of deployment to a war front, where civilians on the path experience many excesses at the hands of the soldiers, sometimes for no compelling reason whatsoever (Rands, 2010). For an institution of such importance, in essence one of the pillars upon which a nation stands, to have the reputation that Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army currently has demands an immediate response of the country's leadership. Many explanations for the rampant violence by the armed forces, including the police, have been offered, some by the forces' own senior officers. These include claims of trauma, the swelling of ranks with former militias that lack proper training, frustration from delay or non-payment of salaries, and above all, the attitude of entitlement that certain members of the organized forces claim as freedom fighters, that they have liberated the country. At times, upon hearing reports of violence perpetrated by the SPLA, senior leaders respond with a shoulder shrug, saying something to the tune of "that is the nature of the SPLA, what could be done?"

These issues are as real in the citizens' lives as they are part of growing pains of a young country and challenges of state building. Their listing by many commentators, outsiders and ordinary South Sudanese alike, is not to deny the achievements that have been made in the last year, nor to fail to appreciate the difficulties of state building in a country that has inherited destruction almost unprecedented anywhere since World War II. For instance, much has been achieved in reigning in on ethnic violence, particularly the mayhem in Jonglei state over the last few years, and it has now been several months since South Sudan's national army, assisted by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), managed to avert a near definite disaster of extermination of the Murle by the Luo Nuer in January 2012. The problem is that despite the lull in that conflict and in many other similar ones, this was not a result of a concerted program of security sector reform, reconciliation between the ethnic groups or a resolution of the root causes and issues that fan that conflict. Instead, the lull is simply part of the usual pattern of conflict, whereby the youth simply tire of fighting, take a break and only to resume when one of the unresolved issues triggers a new fight. The situation continues to remain precarious and requires, first of all, a clear understanding of the dynamics that make these recurrent episodes of violence possible. It also requires a comprehensive approach that involves research, institutional improvements in the security apparatus, infrastructure such as the roads and communication facilities, reconciliation processes, and above all, a well-studied investment in youth programs. The piecemeal approach that has been espoused over the years, focusing on



disarmament alone, isolating it from all the relevant factors, has clearly run its course as it becomes all too evident that guns alone are not the center of the matter and that they can always be obtained from the multiple sources in the region.

Ethnic violence and general insecurity throughout the country does not only pose an impediment to development and service delivery, but also an existential threat to the young country. This has created a cycle that is increasingly difficult to get out of, and which reinforces poverty and strained ethnic relations left over from the wartime, leading to ethnic-based competition over limited resources and political offices. This competition in turn develops into the use of ethnic violence to advance the chances of ethnic-minded politicians and administrators, making development near impossible because of insecurity emanating from ethnic rivalry.

Having made these observations through following the discussions and debates in the media, online discussions by South Sudanese, and in public forums, the Sudd Institute, taking very seriously the threat that is posed by ethnic violence to human life, community, individual property, the country's capacity to develop and deliver services, the viability of the state and the growth of a sense of collective nationhood, wishes to conduct field research and to carry out analysis that would properly contextualize these issues, all with a view to provide concise and actionable policy recommendations on how the new nation can best address the issues of ethnic violence.

---

### **References**

- Harragin, Simon, "Background Paper for Bor, Twic, Ghol and Nyaraweng Dinka." Jonglei State – Strengthening Conflict Mitigation & Peace-Building – Nairobi Conference 19-21 March 2012
- National Democratic Institute, *Governing South Sudan: Opinions of South Sudanese on a Government that can Meet Citizen Expectations*. Washington, DC NDI, 2012.
- Richard Rands, "In Need of Review: SPLA Transformation in 2006–10 and Beyond," Small Arms Survey, Geneva, 2010.
- Sommers, Mark and Stephanie Schwartz, "Dowry and Division: Youth and State Building in South Sudan. Washington, DC.: United States Institute of Peace, 2011



### **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 decisionmaking in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

### **About the Author**

Jok Madut Jok is co-founder of the Sudd Institute. Jok serves in the Government of South Sudan as undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. He is a Professor in the Department of History at Loyola Marymount University in California, from which he is on an extended leave. He is the author of three books and numerous articles on Sudan.

Jok holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

