



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

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Pope Francis's Visit to South Sudan and its Significance

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Introduction

The three-day papal visit to South Sudan, from February 3-5, 2023, is both historic and humbling.¹ Taken as such, there is every reason to believe that it has symbolically and tangibly done some good to our beloved citizens, national leaders, and the country. This Weekly Review highlights the significance of the Papal Visit.

The Significance

First, the visit brought the world religious leaders in one place to pray for, plead with, and counsel the leaders and the people of South Sudan. The visit was meant to usher in a period of peace and reconciliation in a conflict battered society. Yes, prayers could have been done in Rome or another place but there is no substitute for on-the-ground-visit. The country ought to greatly appreciate His Holiness Pope Francis and his colleagues, Archbishop Dr. Justin Welby of Canterbury and Rt. Rev. Iain Greenshields, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, for coming in union to show solidarity with the people of South Sudan.

Second, the visit has enabled South Sudan to demonstrate that it can organize and succeed in matters related to public functions. The choreograph was superb, reflecting the good organizational skills from the Vatican, the local Catholic Church, and the national organizing team, especially the Presidency. This level of organization could offer practical lessons for managing other critical areas in South Sudan. This signifies that South Sudan could host events of regional or international significance, such as sports matches, IGAD Summits, EAC Summits, and more, serving humanity more broadly. Pulling this event off as the country did means it can do the same for general elections, census, or any other significant initiative.

¹ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-02/pope-at-audience-visit-to-drc-and-south-sudan-to-bring-peace.html>

Third, the papal visit has shone a spotlight on South Sudan, urging the international community to double its efforts in supporting South Sudan to achieve an inclusive and durable peace. The visit enabled the Holy Father to follow up on his previous messages and speak hard-truths to the people and their leaders, as well as to development partners, focusing on what this Weekly Review further highlights below.

Leadership

Many observations of leadership failure leading to wars, lack of development, and state failure, have been repeatedly sung in South Sudan. The Holy See cited the importance of leadership in restoring stability, setting stage for development, and uniting people. According to the Holy See, “[l]eaders are the springs that water the life of the community.” He went on to emphatically state that “South Sudanese need fathers, not overlords; they need steady development, not constant collapses.”

The challenge is now for all the leaders across the board to do the needful and move this country to the next frontier, thereby realizing the ideals of the liberation struggle.

Corruption

Throughout his speech, the Holy See used the Nile River metaphor, linking it to public service values/concepts, including economic governance and peace. When the riverbed is not clean, troubles abound, such as flooding, he said. This is akin to managing corruption. When corruption reigns, manifested through ‘inequitable distribution of resources, secret schemes, patronage deals, diversion of people’s resources, and the absence of transparency and accountability’, the “riverbed of human society gets polluted.” In turn, a polluted human society wallows in poverty, which, as the Holy See noted, breeds hatred, grievances, divisions, and above all, political and social instability. There is no denying that corruption, poverty, and conflicts have become common features in modern South Sudan. South Sudan is the world’s second most corrupt country, ranking just above Syria and Somalia, according to the recent publication by the Transparency International²; over 80 percent of the country’s population live below the poverty line³; and the 2013-2018 political conflict is assessed to have claimed about 400,000⁴ lives and displaced several millions.

Climate Change

The Nile River is widely considered a source of life for inhabitants along it. Yet, extreme weather events, including floods, have repeatedly threatened people’s lives and livelihoods, which the Holy See associates with a response of the ‘wounded and battered nature,’ with deadly consequences. One such source of wound is ‘profiteering’ deforestation, creating imbalance in nature and causing the river to explode.

² <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/ssd>

³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=SS>

⁴ <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/newsevents/news/2019/war-south-sudan-estimated-have-led-almost-400000-excess-deaths>

Deforestation via sustained charcoal production and sales threatens South Sudan's ecological future, with considerable negative social and environmental consequences⁵. This calls for an urgent action, protecting God's gifts for people's stability and development.

Investing in National Cohesion and Diversity

His Holiness, using an *encounter* analogy, remarked that the people of South Sudan ought to embrace one another, 'making room for others and by welcoming every neighbor as a brother or sister.' This is the more the people torn by many years of conflict need, engendering cohesion in diversity. "There is need to look beyond groups and differences in order to journey as one people," as exemplified by the Nile tributaries. He went on to say: "This is the path to take: to respect one another, to get to know one another and to engage in dialogue." He asked South Sudanese to "[d]ialogue without duplicity and opportunism."

Role of the International Community

The Holy See urged the international community not to just analyze and report on the situation. Rather, 'there is need to be directly involved, with patience and determination. To resist temptation to impose pre-established models (i.e., sanctions) alien to local realities...' South Sudan faces international sanctions, including an arms embargo, with serious security consequences throughout country.

The R-ARCSS and Roadmap

The Holy See urged South Sudan to turn the page, committing to an urgent implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement and the Roadmap, which the parties endorsed. The Pope could not be clearer. And with the implementation comes the need for both peace and justice, for if there is no justice, then there won't be freedom, he said.

Speaking of the Republic⁶

Here the Holy Father admonishes the leaders while educating the public. 'Seeing yourselves as truly public, of the people, meaning that the state belongs to everyone, with those entrusted with great responsibility, presiding over the people's affairs, ought to place themselves at the service of their own people. A Republic serves as its primary purpose, delivering goods for the greater good.' To be sure, South Sudan relies heavily for most basic services (i.e., health, education, food) on the international community; as well, Juba spends more annually than the ten states combined.

⁵ <https://www.suddinstitute.org/publications/show/626953bc133ff>

⁶ It is true that a lot of what the Pope said is not new, and much has been written about before or discussed even by South Sudanese people and their partners. The message on nipping corruption in the bud; of enshrining good governance, exploiting natural resources for the common good, and building good neighborliness, among issues that have been discussed in the past. Despite their mundaneness, the Pope brings voice and perspective, thereby highlighting them again for our attention.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the Holy See had a message for everyone—the government, national, state, and local leaders, the citizens, and international community. We sum this up as follows:

- For the government—the call centers on fixing the economy, providing public services, ensuring good governance, promoting democracy, and building relations with neighbors, those far and near.
- For the South Sudanese public—love your neighbors, forgive one another, respect laws, be humble, and work hard.
- For the international community—there is need to go beyond regurgitating despair in South Sudan or criticizing from the sidelines. This includes getting involved, exercising patience, and contextualizing decisions.

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 to promote a more peaceful, just, and prosperous society.

Authors’ Biography

Augustino Ting Mayai is the Director of Research at the Sudd Institute. He holds a PhD in Sociology, with concentrations on demography and development from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He currently studies how state effectiveness affects child health outcomes in South Sudan and Ethiopia. Dr. Mayai has written extensively on South Sudan’s current affairs.

James Alic Garang is a co-founder and scholar at The Sudd Institute. His areas of interest include macroeconomics, development economics, financial sector, and financial inclusion. He has in the past participated in host of academic and professional undertakings, including internships at the African Development Bank in Tunisia (2009-2010), as a lead evaluator on the Banking Sector during the “Comprehensive Evaluation of the Government of South Sudan, 2006-2010”, a consultant with the World Bank (2013-2014), and a board member serving on a number of charitable organizations and academic affiliations. A former McNair Scholar, and a member of Omicron Delta Epsilon, James holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. A former Deputy Dean of Faculty of Economic & Social Studies at Upper Nile University and a Senior Economist with the Ebony Center for Strategic Studies, he is currently a Senior Advisor to the Executive Director at the IMF Executive Board in Washington, DC.