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South Sudan: The dilemma of a protracted social conflict

By Timothy T. KULANG ^{a†}
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Abstract. This study examined the conflict in South Sudan, which started in December 2013 due to political dissatisfaction between President Salva Kiir and his then Vice President Riek Machar. When South Sudan got independence in 2011 through a referendum where more-than 98 percent of the population supported secession from Sudan, the country became a case study for potential secessions in Africa. However, the euphoria of independence quickly evaporated, and immediately replaced by violent conflict. Thus, the study explored the major causes of the conflict and concluded that political discontent resulting from power struggle among the elites fuelled the conflict. Furthermore, the study argues that citing ethnicity as the fundamental cause of the conflict is misleading and ill-conceived. Rather than being the catalyst of the conflict, the present conflict in South Sudan has rekindled ethnic identities and ideologies to a record height. The new wave of ethnic sentiment in South Sudan is as a result of irrational quest for political power and control among the top echelons in the country. Although ethnicity is not considered as the main cause of the conflict, however, given that the present situation has invigorated ethnic identities and sentiments in the country, the study concludes that any viable solution to the conflict must give incentives to fair ethnic and inter-ethnic representation and coalitions.

Keywords. South Sudan, Power struggle, Ethnicity, Violence conflict, Peace-building.

JEL. A13, A14, A30.

1. Introduction

South Sudan, the youngest country in the world as of today has experienced conflict at different stages of its emancipation. South Sudan civil war is traceable back to 1955, when Sudan was trapped in a bloody civil conflict that led to her independence from a long rule by the Anglo-Egyptian regimes in 1956 (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012). South Sudan being part of Sudan as of then was involved in the protracted violent struggle for independence. After gaining independence as part of Sudan in 1956, the Southern region of Sudan (now South Sudan) faced internal marginalization and suppression from her Northern neighbors, which resulted in internal conflict and distrust between the North and South. According to Ottaway & El-Sadany (2012) colonial legacy laid the foundation for post independence conflict in Sudan, given that the country was officially partitioned into two - North and South by the colonial masters. Thus, even before gaining independence, the people of Sudan have already developed a sense of dissimilarity among themselves.

In 1983, due to feelings of marginalization, the Southerners, under the leadership of John Garang sought independence from the North, which resulted in a civil war that lasted until 2005, when the “Comprehensive Peace Agreement”

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(CPA) was signed between the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM), a political front for the Southerners and the ruling Sudanese government in Khartoum. The CPA relatively brought peace to the country. However, in 2011, South Sudan seceded from Sudan through a referendum, which more-than 98 percent of the population voted in favor of secession from Sudan. Regrettably, the oil rich country was confronted with internal conflict almost from the onset of her independence.

A lot of factors have been identified to be the key issues that prompted the conflict, such as political discontent and greed for power among the elites, weak institutions, ethnicity and the availability of “lootable” natural resources among others. These identified factors in one way or another prompted the conflict or plays a role in sustaining it. Worryingly, the two main actors in the conflict, President Salva Kiir and his former vice Riek Machar have manipulated the situation, and to some degree managed to convince their ethnic groups that the conflict is ethnically motivated, rather than a consequence of a personal and political dissatisfaction between the two leaders, while availability of natural resources has made it easy for the warring factions to access materials resources and thus prolonging the conflict.

2. Methodology

The study employed the content analysis method. The reason for adopting this method is primarily because the study is a qualitative research that relied heavily on documentary evidence in data collection. Therefore, the content analysis method, using secondary sources of data became imperative.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by the theory of Protracted Social Conflict developed by Edward Azar in the early 1970s. It generally refers to long lasting, complex, severe, commonly enduring, and often violent conflicts. The theory explains prolonged and often violent struggle by communal groups for such basic needs as security, recognition, acceptance, fair access to political institutions and positions, and economic participation (Ramsbotham, 2005). The theory suggests that protracted social conflict is almost inevitable in situation where a group’s identity is threatened or frustrated or when their access to basic needs is limited. In this case, hostile interactions between communal or ethnic groups that are based in deep-seated racial, ethnic, religious and cultural hatreds, which persist over long periods of time with sporadic outbreaks of violence, are indications of protracted social conflict (Azar, 1990).

In summary, protracted social conflicts occur when communities are deprived of satisfaction of their basic needs, when there is a feeling of marginalization in power structure on the basis of communal identity, resulting from colonial legacy, domestic historical setting, and the multi-communal nature of the society. Azar identified four variables, as the predominant sources of protracted social conflict: communal content, deprivation of human needs, governance and the state’s role, and international linkages (Azar, 1990).

On the first variable “Communal Content,” Azar contends that “multi-ethnicity” is the major cause of protracted social conflict in any given society. Multi-ethnicity, whether as a result of colonial conquest and legacy or historical dominance of one group over other, often create “disarticulation between the state and society as a whole” (Azar, 1990: 7; Ramsbotham, Miall, & Woodhouse, 2011). Azar notes that, “it is the relationship between identity groups and the state that is at the core of the problem.” States that are dominated by a single ethnic group or a coalition of a few communal groups that are unresponsive to the needs of other groups in the society usually create an avenue for protracted social conflict. In this respect, one may argue that South Sudan being a country where a certain ethnic group - the Dinka dominates both the political and economic landscape to their

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advantage provokes a feeling of marginalization and subjugation among other ethnicities in the country.

Besides, protracted social conflict is usually imminent in multi-ethnic settings, where the governments and leaders are unable, incapable or unwilling to provide basic human necessities to the population. Consequently, individuals turn to their social groups/ ethnicity for sustenance. Such disconnection of the society and the state creates mistrust and apathy for the government by the citizens. In Africa, ethnic segregation is linked to colonial legacy, which, artificially partitioned and imposed European ideas of territorial statehood onto a multitude of communal groups (Ramsbotham, 2005). This resulted in the domination of certain ethnic groups by others. In most cases, the dominant group isolates itself from the needs of other groups, leading to an even bigger separation between groups even within an ethnicity (Ramsbotham, 2005).

The second variable “Human Needs”, deals with accessibility to developmental human needs. Human needs are insatiable and evolve; the satisfaction of a particular need gives rise to another need. The basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, sanitation, education, and healthcare) are the basis of all human needs (Macslow, 1943). Thus, individual or communal survival depends on the provision of their basic needs, however, due to structural scarcity; these basic needs are rarely attainable to a segment of the society, whilst others live in affluence. Consequently, destitution and lack suffered by a segment of the society as against another, paves way for grievances resulting from deprivation. When such grievances are not properly managed, they often degenerate to protracted social conflict. Therefore, the degree to which minority groups can access the market or political institutions is a factor that can avert or induce protracted social conflict. Although physical needs may not be a direct trigger of conflict, they reinforce the dynamics of conflict in societies experiencing severe lack.

The third variable, “Government and the States Role,” examines the role of the state in making sure that all communal groups within its border and jurisdiction are well taken care of, in terms of meeting their basic needs, ensuring fair allocation of resources and access to political power. Azar contends that a common issue with countries experiencing protracted social conflict is that power is dominantly controlled by one identity group. Consequently, the available resources are recycled among the ruling group at the expense of other groups. Besides, conscious efforts are made by the ruling group to hinder other groups from fair access to political power. Thus, there is a direct relationship between regime type and the level of legitimacy, access to basic needs and protracted social conflict (Azar, 1990).

The last variable “International Linkages,” examines how external influence affects communal groups’ access to basic needs, security and recognition. Azar identified economic dependency and client relationships as two main factors that weakens the autonomy of a state and thus, affects its overall functionality. In this case, states that depend on others for economic development often experience undue external influence that usually distort their domestic political and economic systems, with inadvertent adverse impact on communal groups access to basic needs in these states. Client relationships, implies where a state entrust its domestic security to another state. In such an arrangement, a state guarantees security to another in return for loyalty. The obvious impact of such arrangement is that the country receiving security guarantee, sacrifices its autonomy and independence, which has an impact on how the needs of the communal groups are addressed.

Furthermore, Azar identified four possible consequences of protracted social conflict as: deterioration of physical security; institutional deformity; psychological ossification and increased dependency and cliency. Observably, all the aforementioned are evident in the present state of South Sudan. Thus, the theory provides a clear background that explains the persistent conflict in the country.

4. Factors facilitating the conflict

This section discusses three factors that contribute to the conflict, which include: power struggle, ethnicity, natural resources and corruption.

4.1. Power struggle

The struggle for political power between President Salva Kiir and his former vice, Riek Machar is at the root of the violent conflict that began in December 2013. The death of John Garang, the leader of SPLM in 1983, paved way for the ascension of Salva Kiir as the leader of SPLM, who then led South Sudan to achieve independence in 2011. After gaining independence, Salva Kiir became the president, while Riek Machar became his vice. As Kiir took over the affairs of the world's newest country, a number of his cabinet members and senior SPLM members, including Machar and the SPLM's secretary-general, Pagan Amum, viewed his leadership as reckless and autocratic (Koos & Gutschke, 2014). The tension among the political class gathered momentum, when the vice-president Riek Machar, SPLM Secretary General Pagan Amun, and Madam Rebecca Garang, the widow of the late SPLM leader John Garang, publicly announced their intentions to run for the post of Chair of the SPLM, and by implication President of the country. President Kiir responded, by revoking executive powers of the vice-president in April 2013 (Dessalegn, 2017). Then in July of the same year, he dissolved the government, removing Machar from the position of vice-president of the nation and other cabinet members from their positions (International Crisis Group, 2014).

On 16 December 2013, President Kiir accused his former vice Riek Machar of plotting a coup against his government, which Machar denied. Consequently, President Kiir ordered the arrest of dissident politicians including Pagan Amum. Machar managed to elude arrest and fled Juba to his home in Jonglei State. Within this period, targeted ethnic killings of civilians took place in Juba, providing an ethnic dimension to the political power struggle between Kiir and Machar. Weeks after the clashes erupted in Juba, heavy fighting between army units loyal to the government and rebel forces loyal to Machar spread to the states of Jonglei, Unity, Central Equatoria and Upper Nile. Thus, the situation escalated from a political rift between President Kiir and Machar to a full blown civil war.

In December 2013, rebels affiliated to Machar held the oil rich towns of Bentiu, and Malakal. The strategically and economically importance of the two towns drew the attention and involvement of external governments in the conflict. The government of Uganda, though under the claim of protecting its borders, intervened in the conflict and used Ariel bombardment to push the rebels out and help government forces to reclaim Bentiu, and Malakal. Thus, the conflict gradually progressed from a political rift among Kiir and Machar, to a violent internal conflict and to a potential regional conflict with the involvement of Uganda.

4.2. Ethnicity

Ethnicity has been the simplistic explanation of the conflict in South Sudan. The elites such as Kiir and Machar has manipulated their political interest and differences and present them in favor of ethnic nationalism, mobilizing their kinsmen into participating in a violent conflict that has taken thousands of lives and render millions of South Sudanese homeless, whilst others are turned to refugees in neighboring countries. Surely, the mass killings of the Nuer people by the Dinka paramilitary groups in Juba in the aftermath of the dispute between President Kiir and his former vice Machar in late 2013 were the pretext to the origin of the outbreak of the war, which at first was only a political dispute. Since then, Kiir and Machar have successfully mobilized key groups of their respective communities, thus, making ethnicity the easiest and simplest explanation of the conflict and the atrocities committed against civilians by the warring factions.

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The claim that ethnicity is the root cause of the conflict is prejudiced, given the fact that not all the Dinka's are in support of Kiir and same is applicable to Machar among his Nuer ethnic group. For example, the Jieng Council of Elders at some point accused Kiir of promoting ethnic divide among the Dinka clans. However, one cannot isolate ethnicity from the conflict given that the official version is that the conflict was triggered by an attempted coup, of which the alleged coup-conspirators came from a range of South Sudan's ethnic groups headed by the Nuer targeting the removal of President Kirr who is a Dinka. Despite the weight of the above argument, available evidence shows that there are Nuer civil servants and soldiers who have remained loyal to President Kirr's government and Riek Machar's followers are not entirely Nuer. In some instances, Nuer opposition forces have also killed other Nuer people because of their perceived political affiliation. This is not to deny the fact that in many cases, individuals have been targeted primarily because of their ethnic affiliation.

Amnesty International documented instances where civilians have been targeted by different parties to the conflict, based primarily on their ethnicity, which could be a justification that ethnicity plays a role in the conflict. Our position is that rather than ethnicity being the catalyst of the conflict, the present conflict in South Sudan has rekindled and inflamed ethnic identities and hatred among tribal groups to a record height, particularly amongst the two numerically big tribes, the Nuer and the Dinka. Thus, the resounding wave of tribal bigotry is a by-product of the conflict. In light of the above, and given the heightened ethnic sentiments in the country, South Sudan should pursue an electoral system that gives incentives to ethnic and inter-ethnic representation as a way to mollify the warring factions. Accordingly, the different ethnic groups - not only the Dinka and the Nuer should be fairly assimilated into leadership/governance positions as a way to pacify the feelings of marginalization, neglect and apathy, particularly among the minority ethnic groups.

4.3. Natural resources and corruption

Natural resources have become a curse to many African countries, in the sense that it has resulted in high level of corruption among government officials and in most cases encourage the government to disconnect itself from the citizens, as they rely on oil revenue instead of tax from citizens. This situation applies by and large to South Sudan, where oil revenue constitutes 98 percent of the national budget and practically all foreign currency earning (Wel, 2013). Thus, South Sudan has the most oil-dependent budget in the world. Obviously, governments that do not depend on their citizens' taxes seem not to be very much concerned about their welfare. This assumption rings true of the situation in South Sudan. The government has largely failed to improve the welfare and living conditions of the population. Instead, the government appears to be much more concerned with internal competitions about rent-seeking and access to natural resources and power. In addition, the government is marred with rotating a set of elites who move seamlessly between the frontlines of rebellion and positions in government, as political situations change (De Waal, 2014).

In South Sudan, political power is leveraged to secure wealth and apparently there is a high level of corruption among state officials. When President Kiir reshuffled his entire cabinet in July 2013, removing prominent elites, such as former vice-president Rick Machar and other cabinet Ministers, he accused the affected government officials of corruption (Lunn, 2016). Besides, in 2012 President Salva Kiir accused 75 ministers and officials of having stolen four billion dollars (USD 4,000,000,000) in state funds and demanded that the stolen money be returned. According to Aljazeera, only 1.5 percent of this sum was actually recovered (Aljazeera, 2014).

Given the above scenario, one may argue that the conflict in the country is actually a function of anger and frustration experienced by the majority of the population. Frustrated soldiers, particularly junior officers and impoverished

youths now see hope in joining militia groups and take up arms against every imaginable enemy, including the government and even themselves. Due to high level of poverty and hopelessness, some youths now believe that it is more honorable to die in the battlefield, than to die gradually from imposed hunger and destitution. Accepted that poverty, anger, frustration and hopelessness may not be the immediate driver of the violent conflict in South Sudan, however they play a role in sustaining the conflict. The point here is that the afore-stated factors have made recruitment of fighters undemanding for the conflicting parties. Thus, any framework for peace and stability in South Sudan must incorporate a comprehensive and genuine road map for youth empowerment/ emancipation programs.

5. Cease-fires and peace agreements

Since the beginning of the conflict in South Sudan, several cease-fires and peace agreements have been initiated. When fighting started in December 2013, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional association comprising of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, the Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda, initiated a peace plan and mandated three envoys to broker a peace deal between Kiir and Machar. IGAD envoys got the warring parties to sign a cease-fire agreement on 23 January 2014. However the agreement was violated shortly after it came into force.

On 9 May 2014, President Kiir and former vice-president Machar signed another ceasefire agreement in Addis Ababa. The agreement was a temporal ceasefire, providing humanitarian corridor up to 30 days, while a framework for a permanent ceasefire was being worked on; unfortunately the agreement was violated within 24 hours. In August 2015, a peace deal known as the “Compromise Peace Agreement” brokered by IGAD was signed by the conflicting parties, but the agreement collapsed in July 2016 and failed to quell the conflict. In December 2017, another ceasefire agreement was signed by the government and several armed groups during peace negotiations in Addis Ababa. The agreement was to take effect from 24 December 2017 and requested all warring factions to “immediately freeze in their locations”; as well it mandated them to release political detainees in their custody. Like earlier agreements, the ceasefire was violated and analysts believe that it failed because not all the warring factions were party to the agreement.

Then on 27 June 2018, President Salva Kiir and former vice-president Riek Machar, signed a “permanent ceasefire agreement” in Khartoum, in the presence of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. The agreement was intended to bring an end to the 5 years civil war. Unlike earlier agreements, this particular agreement allows the African Union and IGAD to “deploy the necessary forces to supervise the agreed permanent ceasefire” (Mbah, 2018). One of the central and contentious issues in the agreement was the proposal to have three different capitals for South Sudan as way to distribute power. Subsequent negotiations were scheduled to be held in Nairobi, Kenya and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia respectively. Although the above agreement did not ensure a complete ceasefire, however the subsequent negotiations went on and on 12 September 2018, President Salva Kiir signed another round of peace agreement with rebel factions in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa to end the civil war (Maasho, 2018). Whether this latest agreement will facilitate sustainable peace in South Sudan, is the question in every ones mouth. However, the answer will be determined with time.

6. Conclusion

The actualization of the sovereign state of South Sudan placed enormous responsibilities on the government of the world’s newest state. The government was confronted with numerous challenges, such as border demarcation with Sudan,

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ending post independence conflict, building functional democratic institutions and transforming the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) into a national army among other issues. Unfortunately, instead of moving towards nation-building, the country drifted into a deadly conflict. Despite efforts by international actors such as IGAD and UNMISS to resolve the conflict, the violence continues to rage because the interrelated casual factors and by extension the root causes of the conflict - power struggle, patronage and impunity and weak institutional capacity among others are yet to be properly addressed.

As it is, the conflict requires a sincere political solution devoid of rapacity. In this case, applying the "moral imagination to peace" (Lederach, 2005), will be a genuine step towards realizing peace in South Sudan. According to Lederach, when engulfed in violence, achieving peace requires connecting the past, present and future (Ogbonna, 2017). In this case, peace needs to be imagined, while still remaining grounded in the realities of the conflict. Apparently, conflict transformation defies a specific set of techniques; rather, it requires a multi-layer analysis that includes the actors understanding and perception of the conflict situation, as well as all the other elements and aspects, dynamics and dimensions of the conflict.

In the specific case of South Sudan, the warring factions should evaluate the fundamental goal of the independence struggle in comparison with the present state of the country. Thus, the casual factors that led to the conflict, mainly power sharing and control along the invigorated ethnic identities should be made the bedrock of any peace-building process and effort.

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