South Sudan Crisis, a Political Dilemma

The political conflict in south Sudan which resulted in an attempted coup on 17th December 2013 and rapidly escalated into armed violence can be understood in various ways. It can be perceived as a power struggle emanating from the post John Garang leadership vaccum even though, historical events also indicate that similar power struggles and ethnic tensions have always exited in South Sudan and also within SPLM/A throughout the period of its liberation struggle. This implies that, such tension is not new nor, is the conflict a mere recurrence of past events but a conflict intertwined within historical and ethno-cultural complexities of independent South Sudan, manifesting in new contextual realities (regional and global) in which deep seeded grievances still remain.

And even though political forces and actors at both state and regional levels have slightly changed, the power structure and ethnic configurations in South Sudan have not. Mahmood Mandani, suggests that the conflict can be explained as either: ethnic struggle between the largest ethnic groups in South Sudan – Dinka and Nuer, or, as power struggle within the SPLM/A leadership.[1] His explanation seems to be consistent with the historical and political circumstances which shaped the SPLM/A liberation struggle especially in the early 1990s following the end of the cold war. Therefore, to achieve lasting peace and stability, South Sudan must institute fundamental political reforms. And the reform agenda might require a radical approach in which the existing structures and systems which have caused and are still vulnerable to conflict are dismantled so as to forge a society in which all South Sudanese' aspirations and future are upheld and shared. In other words, all South Sudanese must feel that they have a stake and that the destiny of their country is also tied to theirs since most of the causes of the conflict are a function of ethnic rivalry.

SPLM/A brief historical perspectives

The SPLM/A was created as a result of mutinies against President Numeiri in which garrisons in Bor and Pibor took lead under the leadership of John Garang.[2] But with time, numerous militia were created in the South by the government in Khartoum in which it

---

[1] Mahmood Mamdani, The problem of South Sudan, the way forward, New Vision, Vol.29, No.004, January 6 2014.
[2] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 357

sought to exploit the rivalries and divisions of the ethnic groups in the south. This was orchestrated by arming tribal militia which launched attacks against the SPLM/A. As a result SPLM/A - predominately Dinka, met opposition by a number of southern based factions some of which received support from the Khartoum government, while others acted independently.[3] Eventually the SPLM/A in turn became very hostile to civilian populations which it deemed to be opposing it. However, 'all factions sought to destroy communities presumed to be supporting their opponents.'[4] These historical circumstances are important in contextualising the post-independence period and also reveal that within South Sudan, the extent of divisionism based on geographical origin and tribe is sensitive because it provides agency and function for how rival ethno-militia groups interact with each other and the state. In addition, SPLM/A internally experienced then, as it does now, ideological power struggles fought along political and ethnic lines.[5] For instance, in 1991[6] Riek Machar a Nuer attempted to take control of the SPLM from John Garang, a Dinka on account that South Sudan should receive independence as opposed to a secularisation, which was Garang's initial position. This power struggle and difference in opinion regarding the political future of South Sudan resulted in bitter tribal split between the Dinka and Nuer and has lasted for years.[7] It is imperative to suggest that the division in the military now is a result of this nature of power configuration in which tribal allegiance plays significant agency. After all, it is this division which Khartoum sought to exploit by supporting Machar against Garang even though fighting also continued within rival Nuer factions.[8] As such, over the years, the SPLM/A remained ideologically weak and the South lacked concrete national identity since affiliation to tribe and clan was much stronger.[9]

South Sudan conflict has also always been influenced by regional forces. Meredith claims that, the South Sudan conflict also picked geo-political dimensions as a result of Bashir's support of the southern rebellion with the aim of achieving regional jihad. Since Uganda was the major passage of arms to Garang's forces, Bashir in-turn supported Uganda

---

[3] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 360
[4] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 360
[5] Reik Machar has been quoted to suggest that the real tension is the difference between the approach to national and state formation. In addition, according to Mamdani, politically the recent conflict is linked to the process of state formation in which ethnicity has been radically politicized. See NewVision, Vol.29, No.004, January 6 2014
[6] This period coincides with the end of the Cold War in which regional and global forces reset their priorities and engagement with many African countries. It is the time in which civil wars in many parts of Africa emerged.
[7] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 593-4
[8] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 594
[9] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 597-8

rebel movements especially the Lords Resistance Army. Eventually the US government responded by supplying arms to the Government of Uganda.[10] As a result, the Uganda-SPLM/A relationship has remained very solid over the years even after the death of John Garang, which occurred in a Uganda People's Defense Army Helicopter a few months after South Sudan received independence.[11] Therefore, it is no surprise that the Uganda army is fighting alongside South Sudan forces,[12] loyal to now president and former vice president Salva Kiir, because the two governments have a historical relationship,[13] built around political and economic interests.

Furthermore, the conflict in South Sudan is complicated due to the presence of natural resources. When oil exploration by an American oil company – Chevron, north of Bentiu revealed commercial deposits especially in Dinka and Nuer territory, Riek Machar's militia was supported by the Khartoum as proxy forces against the SPLM/A so as to secure oil fields for investment.[14] This might explain why the Riek affiliated SPLM/A forces in opposition have had military advantage in the northern oil producing areas, - a fact attributed to their long presence and attachment to that region.

Nation building Vs State formation

The SPLM/A independence struggle ended through a negotiated Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005, which aimed to achieve democratic transformation as well as self-determination for the people of South Sudan.[15] However, the post-independence period also ushered in a number of challenges for the new state. These challenges were glaring and indicated troubled future times although the state with support from the 'international community' was more concerned with state formation – establishing power structure and authority, as opposed to nation building which would require addressing the

---

[10] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 594

[11] Marc Lecay, New York Times, Death of Sudan Rebel Leader Imperils Fragile Hope for Peace, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/02/international/africa/02sudan.html?pagewanted=all> seen, 1 February 2014

[12] BBC, Key South Sudan town of Bor recaptured from rebels, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25794699 Seen 11 March 2014
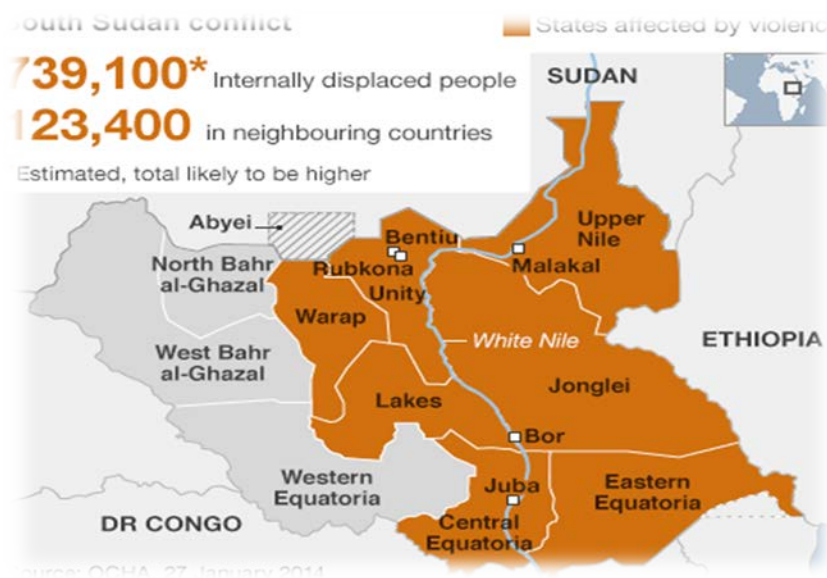
[13] Nicholas Kulish, Uganda Issues a Warning Over Fighting in South Sudan, < http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/31/world/africa/uganda-fighting-in-south-sudan.html> seen 1 Feburary 2014

[14] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 594

[15] Ashenafi Abedje, VOA, Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement, < http://www.voanews.com/content/sudans-comprehensive-peace-agreement-cpa-112719954/157128.html > Seen 1 February 2014

underlying drivers of conflict so as to establish a united South Sudan with a common idea of national identity. The emphasis to state formation however led to the emergence of certain contradictions which included the consolidation of a lot of powers to the presidency, an undisciplined army, highly militarised society, and the unwritten power sharing agreement that unfairly excludes other ethnic groups.[16] It is also suggested that due to corruption and priority defense spending, there is little to show of the $10 billion windfall from the last stable six years after the peace agreement, while despite the overwhelming support for independence, the country remains deeply divided along ethnic and tribal rivalry – thus a dysfunctional state.[17] These contradictions have been in play and according to Mahmood Mandani, caused the questioning of Salva Kiir's leadership at personal, ethnic and ideological levels. That president Kiir has moved to dismantle what had remained of accountability structures at state and party levels. And that politically, the state army still lacks a semblance of a national army since most of it is a collection of militia which are also controlled by ethnically affiliated generals.[18]

Map 1. Areas Affected by Conflict.

Source: BBC, 2014

Therefore, while genuine grievances exist among the population, *the real and immediate cause of conflict seems to be the difference in political orientation in which the core question is what direction the state must pursue to achieve its national development objectives*. It has

---

[16] Daily Monitor, South Sudan and its unfinished business < http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/South-Sudan-and-its-unfinished-business/-/688324/2168520/-/view/printVersion/-/pnpw0pz/-/index.html>, seen 1 February 2014
[17] Martin Meredith, The State of Africa , 2011,p. 601
[18] Mahmood Mamdani, The problem of South Sudan, the way forward, New Vision, Vol.29, No.004, January 6 2014.

been already suggested that neither a peace agreement or some form of military victory will be adequate to deliver the country upon the path of long term stability and prosperity. Instead, a democratic process which would involve all Sudanese' participation is the most viable approach to achieving and building a South Sudan nation and it is this approach that the international community needs to align its aid to the state.

Looming humanitarian and regional challenges[19]

By the time the cessation of hostilities agreement was signed, violence had already lasted several weeks, and several hundred of thousands had been reported dead with over 705,800 people displaced by direct violence. In addition, 4.9 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.[20] Internal displacement is already exacting pressure on domestic resources and eventually leading to a humanitarian catastrophe since the country has not fully recovered from many decades of violence especially in terms of its capacity to sustainable food security. Regionally, refugee settlement will further put pressure on resources around host communities especially northern Uganda which is also recovering from almost two decades armed conflict. So far, it is reported that about 80,000 South Sudanese have fled their country with half of them in West Nile region of Uganda.[21] Thus, the conflict has attracted the involvement of neighbouring countries, through IGAD, which has been taking lead in the mediation for a peaceful resolution, but is also now considering deploying a stabilisation force in the country.[22]

In conclusion, the conflict in South Sudan is as complex as is its political history since it involves intra, internal and external dynamics producing powerful forces which influence the current power system within a changing regional and global system. As such, solutions need to take on the form of the problems they seek to solve. It implies therefore, that

---

[19] See Map.1

[20] As of 6 March, UNOCHA indicates that 758,400 people across South Sudan have been reached including 234,000 refugees sheltered in the country. See: South Sudan Crisis Situation Report as of 6 March 2014 Report number 25, < http://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-crisis-situation-report-6-march-2014-report-number-25 >

[21] UNHCR, Almost 80,000 South Sudanese flee to neigbouring countries as fighting generates more displacement, < http://www.unhcr.org/52d516da6.html >, seen 1 February 2014

[22] Reuters, East African States mull stabilization force for South Sudan, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/04/us-southsudan-unrest-idUSBREA2314D20140304 Seen 11 March 2014

solutions will be sought first from within and outside the state, through reforms which will encourage arrangements that can guarantee the participation of conflicting and grieved actors.

Stephen Okello