The Ethnic Roots of South Sudan’s Conflict

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Abstract
South Sudan’s conflict has continued unabated for decades as armed groups with diverse interests have splintered and fought. In light of this unremitting conflict, this paper argues that the 2013 re-eruption of South Sudan’s conflict was primarily wrought by ethnic divisions, though the manipulation of such divisions by elites, weak institutions, and competition over resources have considerably prolonged the civil war in the country. The failure to manage ethnic heterogeneity after independence in South Sudan enabled the political elite to manipulate ethnic fault lines created during the colonial period and nurtured during the north-south civil wars. Too, lack of political will by the post-independent South Sudanese government to build strong institutions has encouraged political elites to trample on existing weak institutions. Rampant corruption has permitted political elites to compete for the control of natural resources. This paper extends our understanding of the existential interface between ethnicity and politics in complex, heterogeneous South Sudan.

Introduction
The resumption of war in South Sudan was not unexpected. In early 2013, three prominent members of SPLM, Vice President Riek Machar, SPLM party’s Secretary General Pagan Amum, and John Garang’s widow Rebecca Nyandeng, declared their intentions to contest the chair of the party. This angered President Salva Kiir, who responded by purging political opponents. In June, he dismissed Finance Minister Kosti Manibe and Cabinet Affairs Minister Deng Alor, alleging financial scandal and corruption. In July, he stripped Machar of delegated powers, and dismissed Machar’s cousin-in-law Taban Deng Gai as governor of the oil producing Unity State. Later in July, he dismissed Machar and his entire cabinet, except four ministers, and suspended Amum as Secretary General of the SPLM party (Africa Union Commission of Inquiry 2014;
Taban 2013). Then, in November, he dissolved all political structures of the SPLM party except for the chairmanship and secretariat, which isolated his critics from both the government and the SPLM party. This political purge followed a forced retirement of several senior officers within the SPLA.

The dismissed group united in a marriage of convenience and appointed Machar as their leader due to his seniority. In December, the dissident SPLM group held a press conference criticising President Kiir’s dictatorial tendencies in the party and government. They called the President to convene a meeting of SPLM’s Political Bureau, the highest decision-making organ of the party, and announced a public opposition rally to be held in Juba later in December. Kiir’s faction countered by announcing the meeting of the SPLM party’s National Liberation Council (NLC). Machar’s group cancelled their public rally and joined the NLC meeting which became a battleground where the president attacked Machar openly for his role in the 1991 SPLA/M split (Africa Union Commission of Inquiry 2014; De Waal 2014; Johnson 2014). Within a short period of time, things had changed from bad to worse in Juba.

A day after the NLC meeting, President Kiir ordered the disarming of the presidential guard, which is an amalgamation of SPLA war veterans and integrated Nuer militia. This disarmament exercise led into fighting within the presidential guard, mostly between Nuer and Dinka soldiers. The following day, Kiir appeared on national television announcing that an attempted coup had been foiled, an announcement synchronised with the massacre of Nuer civilians in several suburbs of Juba, and the arrest of opposition politicians. Several units of Nuer soldiers mutinied in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity States, killing scores of Dinka civilians. Machar, who had fled to Jonglei at the initial time of these mutinies, called for the overthrow of President Kiir’s government (Africa Union Commission of Inquiry 2014). Because his breakaway faction, composed mostly of Nuer, had few resources to support a successful rebellion against the well-equipped government of President Kiir, Machar appealed to ethnic sentiment by mobilising the ‘White Army’ of Lou Nuer youth to fight the government. The ‘White Army’ helped Machar to overrun Bor town heading towards the capital Juba. The presence of Ugandan troops and Darfur rebels in South Sudan helped President Kiir’s government from being overrun by Machar’s forces, even though several Nuer generals and many troops defected to Machar’s faction (De Waal 2014). The 2013 conflict was fought along the same line as the 1991 SPLA/M conflict whereby Machar’s and President Kiir’s groups were pitted against each
other, with strong ethnic overtones.

This paper argues that the 2013 resumption of conflict in South Sudan was primarily and consequently wrought by ethnic divisions. I discuss first the ethnic manipulation that was a central factor in the conflict when political elites failed to manage ethnic heterogeneity, leading to the resumption civil war. I then examine how failure to build strong state institutions added to the conflict, exacerbated in turn by competition for resources to exploit.

**Ethnic Manipulation**

Ethnic manipulation has a long history before South Sudan’s independence when colonial overlords and northern Islamic theocrats practiced it in southern Sudan by preferring some ethnic groups, especially in the police and military, over others (Johnson 2003). These ethnic divisions were exacerbated during colonial times and solidified during the north-south civil wars and have since been manipulated by South Sudan’s political elite to maintain power by stacking security forces with ethnic loyalists. This unethical practice was evident from day one of the conflict when the Nuer soldiers in the presidential guards were disarmed by the Dinka soldiers, leading to the fighting along ethnic lines. According to the African Union Commission of Inquiry (2014), the subsequent killings of people of the Nuer ethnic group in Juba, for example, were conducted by private militias trained by President Kiir; likewise, the killings of people of the Dinka ethnic group in towns outside Juba were conducted by Machar-affiliated renegade generals. Among the orchestrators of these ethnic pogroms during the conflict was the infamous National Security Service (NSS) that has often been accused of being behind the unknown gunman killings in Juba. The literature attests that dictatorial governments redirect national funds to fight civil wars against other ethnic groups (Prendergast, Clarke, & Van Kooten, 2011). This movement of funds to relevant army units to fight on behalf of government is facilitated by a dynamic of heterogeneity. As a result, South Sudan’s conflict became intense along ethnic lines because the ethnic configuration of the country is so heterogeneous that it is too easy to identify where one belongs, which exacerbated ethnic divisions further during the war.

Nevertheless, the dynamics of heterogeneity increased defections from the government and the forging of alliances during and after the outbreak of South Sudan’s conflict. For this reason, military personnel of the Nuer ethnic group defected to Machar due to feeling threatened and intimidation from ethnic militia loyal to President Kiir. This is the same with the level of ethnic manipulation that pushed the SPLA/M
deputy Chairman, William Nyuon, during the bush war to splinter from the SPLA/M (Johnson 2003). Evidence shows that in heterogeneous societies, members defect because they are highly identifiable, which makes them more inclined to ethnic confrontation (Van de Ploeg, 2011). This is particularly the case when heterogeneous groups become fractionalised. Using econometric tests, however, Blimes (2006) shows that ethnic fractionalisation is indirectly linked to civil war onset. This observation makes sense because there is a perception that South Sudan’s national army was dominated by people of the Nuer ethnic group, while the government was dominated by people of the Dinka ethnic group. Literature suggests that in a country where the government is dominated by one ethnic group, the position of marginalised ethnic groups would likely change in favour of ethnic confrontation (Jacob, 2012). This assertion is fragile and cannot be inclusively relied upon. Some countries in Sub-Sahara Africa are homogenous, such as Somalia, but still conflict has raged without a solution.

The ethnic composition of the national army in South Sudan, which led to the conflict being fought along ethnic lines during the early days of the conflict, was facilitated by the ‘big tent’ policy. This was an ethnic accommodation policy in which illiterate ex-ethnic militia groups, mostly Nuer, were pardoned and amalgamated into the national army by President Kiir before the 2013 re-eruption of conflict (Johnson, 2014). Although this policy seems to have worked well in the short term, as there was no all-out war experienced from the illiterate ex-ethnic militias before December 2013, it contributed to the initial upsurge of gun violence along ethnic lines. According to De Waal (2015), the ‘big-tent’ policy brought loyalty to President Kiir’s government, and the price of that has increased with greater competition leading to conflict and shifts in allegiances. The ‘big tent’ policy prior to the renewal of the civil war was an opportunity for some rebel groups to get into higher government positions. Daly (1993) and Johnson (2003) show that during the liberation struggle, many militias were sponsored by the Sudanese government to fight the SPLA/M and some of these militias were led by officers who had splintered from the mainstream SPLA/M. The Khartoum government bribed them to fight their kith and kin in the south. The opportunities created by the bribery of militias during the north-south civil wars are the same as the opportunities created by the ‘big tent’ policy, which have significantly influenced post-independence South Sudan’s conflict being fought along ethnic lines.

In addition, the heavily armed youth have known nothing else apart from conflict as many were born in war and grew up in war. The majority
of them have not had any formal education. According to Collier and Hoeffler (2004), the risk of conflict is highest where there are large numbers of uneducated youth and primary commodities that are easily looted. Notably, South Sudan’s youth population is 75% (Deng 2013), with a literacy rate of 35% (Africa Development Bank 2013). These combinations make conflict certain. The youth, left with no option to obtain wealth for customary functions such as dowry or bride price, become involved in conflict such as cattle rustling and even getting involved in greed-based militia conflict to acquire wealth for marriage and prestige. They become vulnerable to political elites who recruit them to fight their selfish wars of power, leading to the unnecessary possession of weapons.

The use of ethnicity during the 2013 South Sudanese conflict was to maintain ethnic politics for the purpose of continuous monopoly of power. Since the re-eruption of the 2013 war, however, the political elite used ethnicity to galvanise support to obtain political power. For instance, the rise of ethnic militias such as Mathiang Anyor and Dot Ku Bany, all Dinka militias recruited only from the president’s ethnic group, and Lou Nuer’s ‘White Army’ after the 2013 resurfacing of the conflict, as indicated by the Africa Union of Inquiry (2014), are clear manifestations of the use of ethnicity to manipulate politics to maintain a monopoly of power. This was the same way President Omar Bashir used south-on-south militias in southern Sudan (Young 2003). To illustrate, the December press conference by disgruntled SPLM apparatchiks was used by President Kiir to frame, identify and falsely arrest the attendees as coup plotters. Admittedly, ethnic favouritism due to power monopoly became clear when some SPLM apparatchiks from President Kiir’s region such as Deng Athorbei, Nhial Deng Nhial and Paul Mayom Akech were not arrested, but were later appointed into important government positions. This political accommodation scaffolds the ‘big tent’ policy in a different form based on ethnic interest, which made South Sudan’s political elite appears a class of war mongers with vested interest in the country’s continuous conflict by way of ethnic manipulation that has fuelled conflict in the country.

The competition for power in South Sudan brings into question the role of political entrepreneurs. Both President Kiir and Machar have been the key stakeholders in South Sudan’s conflict since the 1980s, meaning that they have significant following from their ethnic groups. For example, the 1991 SPLA/M split spearheaded by Machar divided the Southern Sudan liberation struggle into the Dinka-led faction and the Nuer-led faction (Johnson 2003). Likewise, the 2013 war was also
fought along the 1991 lines in which the Dinka ethnic group was pitted against the Nuer ethnic group. This continuous rise of ethnic sentiments, however, points to the failure of the post-independence South Sudan’s institutions to capitalise on encouraging ethnic harmony and tolerance. Kiir’s and Machar’s attitudes of political entrepreneurship, in which they were intransigent in maintaining the status quo and encouraging the erupting of conflict, have seen enormous loss of innocent civilian lives. Blagojevic (2009) captured the lethal role of political entrepreneurs in stating that

the instability and uncertainty that result from a major structural change and the institutional inability to regulate inter-ethnic relations, provides a perfect condition in which political entrepreneurs can manipulate ethnic emotions in order to mobilise groups for their own political purpose (22).

Kaufman too (1996, p.109) refers to those politicians who hold power by exploiting political differences, steering ethnic hatred and drawing on historical memories of injustices in order to justify their actions as belligerent leaders. Thus have Kiir and Machar belligerently manipulated ethnic emotions for their own political ambitions before and during South Sudan’s conflict. This unprincipled ethnic manipulation of politics for selfish gain has paralysed the fostering of national cohesion in South Sudan.

Nevertheless, the dysfunction of ethnically composed judiciary and civil service is not out of context. Roque and Miamingi (2017) maintain that marginalisation of other ethnic communities through ethnic politics promoted ethnic nationalism in which people from the Dinka ethnic groups, particularly those related to the president, have dominated national institutions, contrary to the goal preached to the masses during the liberation struggle. Other ethnic groups, who felt marginalised, as observed by Roque and Miamingi, connived in armed conflict to topple the Dinka-led government for them to have a share of the national cake. The government, however, sees criticism and rising against its rule as a problem of rebel groups using ethnic sentiment to galvanise support. This practice is similar to northerners’ domination of southern administrative posts after colonial overlords handed over power to Sudanese officials in 1956 (Alier 1990; Johnson 2003).

Ethnicity has been used in South Sudan as a tool for determining the government. The president on numerous occasions meets with leaders of various ethnic groups to obtain their support. These ethnic groups recommend who should be appointed into the government as a minister. Comparatively, however, the use of ethnicity to further ethnic hegemony
is not a new thing. In multi-ethnic countries, for example, there are ethnic parastatal organisations, ethnic military, ethnic police, and ethnic political parties. According to Ben-Ami, Peled and Spektorowoskai (2000), when the nation’s institutions are dominated by ethnic structures, the government becomes distanced from people while ethnic groups become much closer. With this intention, ethnic allegiance overtakes institutional processes which consequently provides fertile grounds for ethnic skirmishes. People from the Dinka ethnic group, especially from the place of origin of the president, have higher numbers in important government positions (Sarwar, 2012). This ethnic disproportionality provides conditions for ethnic civil war, as with South Sudan’s conflict.

In the same way, ethnicity has also been used to create and further economic patronage which in turn has led to increased corruption when people who misappropriate public funds are not brought to book because they are protected from prosecution by patronage networks. The government of South Sudan has on numerous occasions awarded lucrative contracts to the clan of the president and has allowed the political elite to steal four billion dollars, none of which has been recovered so far (De Waal, 2014; De Waal, 2015). This practice causes economic asymmetry as certain ethnic groups dominating the state’s economic system becomes well off compared to the less dominating ethnic groups (Bloom, 1985). In other words, economic asymmetry in multi-ethnic countries appears not to have been due to hard work of a particular group of people, or their tendency to embrace liberal ideas of capitalism; but instead, it appears to have been due to historical manipulation of economic policies allowed by a particular ethnic government in favour of a particular ethnic group, from which key actors in such an ethnic government originate. Therefore, the conflict in South Sudan, as was the case during the bush war, appears a manipulation of ethnicity to promote patrimonialism in the judiciary and civil service, which has boomeranged into the revival of conflict.

**Weak Institutions**

South Sudan’s political elite have failed to build strong institutions and instead manipulated existing institutions to promote unscrupulous practices that have induced the conflict. The weaknesses inherent in the judicial and legislative branches of government contributed to the re-eruption of the civil war because they are manipulated by an executive president who exercises power as he chooses. Studies specific to South Sudan’s renewed conflict show that leaders in these important government branches are handpicked and dismissed on whim by President Kiir (Nyaba, 2018; Maimingi, 2018). The architect of
South Sudan’s transitional constitution granted enormous powers to the president, thus creating suspicion about electoral conduct in the country. If, for example, there were strong institutions to regulate the conduct of elections, whether within the SPLM political party or in nationwide elections, the current war might have been averted. The weak state of SPLM party structures, as well as the nationwide institutions of South Sudan, allowed the executive and particularly the president to make decisions that damaged the unity and cohesiveness of the country.

Similarly, a weak security sector was one of the most important factors that allowed the revival of South Sudan’s conflict. Johnson (2016), as the head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), believed that the South Sudanese conflict was a result of weak security institutions that always carried risks of internal fragmentation and instability. The history of divisions within the liberation movement, the plethora of militias and Khartoum’s proxy forces made South Sudan vulnerable. Johnson implies that strong security institutions might have averted the conflict in South Sudan.

Nonetheless, due to weak institutions, including gerrymandering in which political elites divided the country into ethnic voting blocs, increased the conflict in South Sudan due to fear of ethnic domination, and land and boundary contestations. In the early months of the conflict, for example, Machar proposed the division of South Sudan into 23 states along the boundaries of former British colonial districts. In a somewhat tit-for-tat move, President Kiir announced the creation of 28 states, which later grew to 32 states, thereby expanding Machar’s division of the country into small ethnic enclaves. This suggests that both Machar’s and Kiir’s gerrymandering policies were due to weak institutions that they abused at will. Moro (2018) concludes that South Sudan’s government manipulated borders to enhance its support. President Kiir’s and Machar’s domination of South Sudan’s conflict during the early months of the violence shows competition for who would win militarily before the re-introduction of political competition, forgetting that the same people they were fighting to win were the ones they were killing in mass numbers. Indeed, the SPLM’s party politics became played out in the form of war, proving Clausewitz’s (1982) understanding of war as a continuation of politics by other means.

In fact, the gerrymandering policy increased ethnic anger and subsequently contributed to the continuation of the conflict. History shows that this was not the first gerrymandering in the country’s history and its aftermath was intensified civil war. Moro (2018), for example, shows how the division of South Sudan caused ethnic anger and subsequent
comparison to Kokoro, which was a deliberate division of South Sudan in 1983 by President Jaafar Nimeiry. According to Moro, many of the oil fields, whose land ownership is vigorously disputed by some South Sudanese ethnic groups, were included in states that exclusively belong to the Dinka ethnic group. As a result, ethnic groups who disputed the boundaries saw it in ethnic terms because President Kiir is a Dinka and his decisions were seen as promoting Dinka hegemony, oblivious to the fact that the South Sudan’s problem is widespread. However, the grievances of angered ethnic groups seem to have some grounds. With the tyranny of numbers and the obvious ethnic politics that is often played out during elections in multi-ethnic countries, President Kiir’s source of support is in States exclusive to the Dinka ethnic group. The angered ethnic groups formed a fear of the future as far as Dinka domination of the government is concerned. Lake and Rothchild (1996) argue that this collective fear of the future leads to ethnic conflict, hence the continuous conflict in South Sudan.

Due to weak institutions created by decades of civil war and lack of willingness to strengthen them, South Sudan’s political elite were able to centralise power to sustain patronage networks important for orchestrating and financing conflict. Reno (1998) states that incapable administration of contemporary rulers uses markets to control and discipline rivals and their supports. Similarly, the 2013 re-eruption of civil war points to the politicisation of this eccentric state-making that was contested by SPLM party members. Radon and Logan (2014) emphasise that South Sudan’s conflict was caused by a political power struggle between the opposing groups of the SPLM party who opposed lack of reform. The government concentrated power in the executive president who uses power at impulse. This made the executive too powerful, with an overriding force that gives no room to political criticism, making it choose extra-legal means to consolidate power. Left with no choice, the opposition, in turn, chooses extra-legal means to fight back. De Waal (2014) concurs with Radon and Logan (2014) on how political power struggle triggered the war in South Sudan. He stresses that the internal party critics might have been interested in the president’s seat to manage internal party revolt in a non-violent way to their advantage by using their high-ranking positions to manipulate political structures. The government’s hesitation to decentralise power to the local institutions might have been centred on fear that it would lead to loss of power. Pendle (2014) adds to De Waal’s (2014) observation that the conflict in South Sudan is a result of the attempt to renegotiate the balance of power using violence, which did not go well within the political echelon of the
former wartime comrades. If the government had focused on building strong institutions that would resist manipulation by the political elite, the war would have been averted.

In any case, due to weak government institutions the SPLM party vested too much power in President Kiir to gain political loyalty, which in turn created an authoritarianism that propelled South Sudan into civil war. Broschê and Högglund (2017) observe that South Sudan’s conflict was instigated by the high centralisation of political power in the executive, which made the president an overriding political figure. President Kiir’s failure to talk peace and come to an understanding with members of his own party catalysed the conflict. He might have calculated to defeat his political rivals militarily, which was thwarted because of the political influence and significant following they have in the country. In a nutshell, President Kiir was solely responsible for the start of the conflict because he had a constitutional mandate to prevent civil war from happening through policies that promoted unity.

In addition to the centralisation of power, South Sudan’s conflict was also a product of competing visions. Johnson (2014) describes the power struggle within the ruling party over its direction. The prominent members of the SPLM party such as Pagan Amum, Machar and Nyandeng had voiced their concerns over the lost of direction and vision of the party based on their hopes of creating a democratic new Sudan. Their criticism of President Kiir, coupled with their intentions to unseat the president through internal party elections, pushed President Kiir into war to maintain the status quo which favours him. While Kiir’s actions pushed the country to war, his political adversaries were not saints either. They might have been driven by what Bayart (1989) terms the ‘politics of the belly’ in which leaders take advantage of their positions to enrich themselves due to weak institutions that they exploit at whim.

**Competition over resources**

Elite competition over South Sudan’s resources appears to have contributed to the re-ignition of the conflict, which became played out in term of kleptocratic assemblage of resource wealth hidden in personal bank accounts outside the country. Even though the political in-fighting in the SPLM party, as stated by Johnson (2014), is the tip of the iceberg of the nature of South Sudan’s conflict situation, De Waal (2014) stresses that the conflict does not only rest in power struggle but is also a result of kleptocratic governance. The kleptocratic elites see any alternative voice to their rule as a threat to their source of wealth. De Waal (2015, p.195) argues that what looked superficially like an ethnic conflict “was in reality a cynical scramble for riches”. This viewpoint
was corroborated by the Enough Project (2017) report, which details how political and military leaders siphoned off money for themselves and their families into foreign countries, a situation described as violent kleptocracy. Evidently, Collier’s (1999) work on the role of economics in civil war concurs with De Waal’s (2014; 2015) observations. He stresses that where there is a primary “lootable” commodity or resource, leaders fight for the control of such a resource. This assertion was further reinforced by Collier and Hoeffler’s (2004) study in which primary commodity exports substantially increase the risk of conflict. Hence, South Sudan’s oil wealth has increased looting of resources on the part of the political elite, which has in turn increased competition over their control by use of ethnic patronage networks.

Nevertheless, the power struggle in the political echelon of the SPLM party was the inverse of a resource struggle. South Sudan’s political class, particularly President Kiir’s critics, according to De Waal’s (2014) analysis, wanted to change the leadership to tilt the kleptocratic governance in their favour. Africa Research Bulletin (2016) adds to the argument of an economic underpinning of South Sudan’s conflict by observing that the resource richness of South Sudan and the attraction of diverting revenues for personal benefit is a key reason why the country has been engaged in a devastating civil war. The few political elites have arrogated themselves the rights to governing the country and control the resources because of their participation in the liberation struggle, forgetting that South Sudan’s liberation was a collective effort of the country’s citizens who voluntarily fought and contributed resources to keep the movement alive. This practice has resulted in militarised institutions that leave no room for reform because the ex-military officials feel threatened by an educated civil population that might come with new ideas that would see them replaced, retired or relegated. The government found recourse in ethnic manipulation to maintain control of the resources vital to sustain political power.

The participation in the liberation war by the 1980s SPLM officials has been used in post-independence South Sudan as a license to silence others and loot resources. This has increased corrupt practices within the liberation class to the detriment of South Sudan’s citizens who are yearning for provision of services. Pinaud (2014, p. 210) states that South Sudan’s military elite ‘formed itself into a new aristocracy through wartime predation and cemented its power through lavishing resources (captured during periods of war and post-war) upon soldiers, former foes, and affiliated kin, thus creating a class of obliged intermediaries through new social contracts’. Although the SPLM political leaders were military
comrades at the inception of the movement in 1983 and during and after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, this did not translate into post-independence political unity. The little unity during the interim period might have been because they wanted to secure the CPA and the independence of South Sudan before resuming their power struggle witnessed during the bush war. It might have also been due to lack of exclusive control over the country’s resources which were still being controlled by the Khartoum government. Considering this political elite practice, the tendency of political leaders to claim the right to rule because they fought for the country fits De Soysa’s (2000) understanding of conflict due to subsoil resources. Political leaders with selfish agendas, who loot resources, often sideline their political adversaries to have unhindered access to resources.

Even though the SPLM political leaders were former guerrilla fighters who became government officials after the signing of the CPA in 2005, their conversion from military officers to civilian administrators did not go well for the country as aggressive corruption increased political in-fighting and corruption. These unconventional practices might have been because of lack of preparedness in governing modalities and effective ways to prevent and deal with corruption. It might have also been due to the change of leadership upon the death of John Garang, who was the insignia of the SPLA/M movement since inception. The post-CPA South Sudan, however, became very different from the pre-CPA southern Sudan. There were no finances during the liberation war in contrast to the post-CPA period. Keen (2000) writes that war is a continuation of economics by other means. The SPLM political leaders, along this line, have shown that the resumption of South Sudan’s civil war has been animated by corruption.

Nevertheless, competing international interest has been a contributor to South Sudan’s conflict. The framing of any conflict as ethnically-based reminds regional and international actors of the horrendous loss of life in human history, and thus can conjure foreign intervention. According to De Waal (2015, p.196), South Sudang became a cockpit for regional rivalries. Uganda sent troops to bolster Kiir in the early days of the conflict; Khartoum has permitted the oil to flow, and kept Juba’s financial lifeline intact, while also supporting Machar; and Ethiopia and Kenya have sought to strengthen their positions as regional powers by contributing troops for a ‘protection and deterrent force’ as part of the UNMISS.

Apuuili (2014) considers the Ugandan intervention in South Sudan illegal, suggesting that the only legitimate intervention that South Sudan
needed was economic assistance to improve its deteriorating economy. Despite Apuuli’s assessment, South Sudan added a new layer of regionalisation, which brings into question the role of regional powers in finding a lasting solution to the conflict in South Sudan.

The acrimonious split between South Sudan and Sudan is also a source of the cause of the conflict. Frahm (2015) writes that both South Sudan and Sudan governments are in a proxy war. Sudan’s government funded militias to destabilise northern parts of the country, especially Unity State where most of South Sudan’s oil is extracted. The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), before South Sudan’s conflict, would bomb border towns in the north, sending shock waves of fear across the country, reminiscent of the days of devastating liberation struggle. Wassara (2015) states that the perceived sabotage between Sudan and South Sudan regenerates hard-to-forget memories of the second Sudanese civil war. The Sudan government might have embraced a psychological war to scare South Sudan’s government from making further claims to contested territories north of its border. In addition, South Sudan took most of the oil at independence, which the Sudan government resented (Moro 2018). The military aggression shown by Sudan’s government has led South Sudan to believe that the former wants the nascent republic to fail to justify its objection to separation.

On the other hand, as observed by Frahm (2015), the South Sudanese government was believed to be the key funding ally of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement – North (SPLA/M-N) which comprises the former SPLA/M members who hail from the Sudan. President Kiir, however, denied his government was supporting the SPLA/SPLM-N to destabilise Sudan. Collier (2008) found that having bad neighbours increases the risk of civil war. Correspondingly, South Sudan has the resentful Sudan government that has been supporting South Sudan’s rebels and militias before and after the revival of the civil war.

Beyond South Sudan’s borders, the oil wealth has been another centrepiece that seems to fuel conflict. The superpowers which include the US and China have their varying interests in South Sudan. Large (2016) argues that China’s engagement came to be dominated by a closely related combination of political and security concerns founded in, but going beyond, its economic interests and associated imperatives of protecting investment. Chinese companies are involved in oil business in South Sudan and have stakes in the oil pipeline that South Sudan uses to transport its crude oil to Port Sudan. To add to this concern, is the effect of China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative. While this initiatives offers infrastructural capital to the developing countries in form of loans
(ZiroMwatela & Changfeng, 2016), it can be detrimental to South Sudan because it makes the nation underestimate and remedy its failures, which confirms Reno (1998) assertion that leaders of weak states compensate their failures by mobilising external resources. Due to China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative, South Sudan’s conflict may increase further as government and rebels groups compete to win China’s support to loot infrastructural loan.

Some scholars see the internationalisation of South Sudan’s conflict differently. Wassara (2015), for example, sees the economic proximity of South Sudan to old European colonial powers of the neighbouring countries as a problem, mentioning that neighbouring countries are stable because of maintaining distance with their former colonial masters. Wassara’s argument is inconsiderate of the fact that deep-seated ethnic divisions in South Sudan have always made negotiated peace agreement fail due to the international community’s ignorance of internal ethnic dynamics.

In fact, history is a witness to foreign powers meddling in South (em) Sudan’s affairs. Alier (1990) shows that when President Nimeiry found a new friend, the US, which provided weapons to fight the war in Southern Sudan, the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement which ended Sudan’s first civil war was abrogated because the government had backing from a strong ally. In this context, South Sudan has the backing of China in the oil business which allows it to fund its weapon buying programmes, thereby giving confidence to defeat the rebels. The role of foreign powers in South Sudan’s economy may have contributed to South Sudan’s conflict if those powers believe in the absolute victory of a single party to the conflict in order to exploit lootable resources such as oil, at the expense of addressing the root cause of the conflict which needs a win-win peace process acceptable to all warring parties.

**Conclusion**

I have argued in this paper that the 2013 re-eruption of South Sudan’s conflict was primarily wrought by ethnic divide. The conflict was worsened by elite manipulation of ethnic divisions, weak institutions and competition over resources. The ruling class pre-emptively exploited ethnicity to suppress political opposition, to defend the government and to appeal to ethnic support bases from the grassroots. These political manoeuvres, collectively, led to the sporadic outbreak of violent conflict that became fought along ethnic lines across South Sudan. Ethnicity has also been used by the rebel groups as a mobilising tool to take over the leadership of the country from the ruling ethnic group or to advance their claim for maximum ethnic bargaining power. Thus far, the role of
ethnicity in South Sudan’s conflict has manifestly been a force to reckon with in the country’s post-independence history and there is need for a clear strategy to counteract its negative effects.

References


