



The Trouble With South Sudan: A Revolution That Ate Its Own Children

By Peter Adwok Nyaba



The highly hyped youngest country in the world has aged so fast that it now lies on the region's sick bed in the hope that the High-Level Revitalisation Forum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, which convened on February 5th 2018, will salvage something from its nearly five years of civil war. "Did South Sudan start to walk prematurely before teething and crawling like other human toddlers, or receiving sufficient and timely immunisation against the post-independence ailments that afflicted most sub-Saharan African countries?" a passer-by asked in astonishment. The truth is that for historic reasons South Sudan does not fit comfortably where it situates politically, economically and diplomatically as a sovereign nation.

"History does not repeat itself", was Marx's repudiation of Hegel's metaphysics: "It occurs as a tragedy, and then a farce." The Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) successfully midwifed the (1994-2005) peace talks that led to the comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). The CPA provided the people of southern Sudan the inalienable right to self-determination. When the time for a referendum came on 9 January 2011, the people of southern Sudan voted overwhelmingly (98.3%) for independence and the Republic of South Sudan was born on 9 July 2011. That was the tragedy. Who could imagine that a country that was barely three years-old and that was emerging from twenty-one years of a devastating war of national liberation could get embroiled in another war?

The roots of the civil war locate in the internal political contradictions in the SPLM, which is linked to the failure of the SPLM leaders to address the fundamental issues of socio-economic and cultural backwardness of the people that underpinned the war of national liberation. This is reflected in the abject poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and superstition prevalent in the new nation, which submerge their consciousness and prevents them from correctly gauging their reality.

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The reasons for South Sudan’s failure are simple: The SPLM leaders spearheaded the war of national liberation without an ideology; they never envisaged or envisioned the state and society they desired and hence lack - or could not marry - the theory and practice of liberation. Moreover, their refusal to politically educate and organise their people entrenched an ethnic-based ideology that expunged progressive thinking among the combatants and the masses of the people. The absence of democratic institutions and instruments of power resulted in the personification, rather than the institutionalisation, of the SPLM’s authority. The linkage between state power and ethnic hubris rolled into an explosive alloy driving the ethnicised power politics.

The internal SPLM contradictions were nothing more than a power struggle within its top echelon. This had been the cause of its splits and internecine fighting since the SPLA/M inception in 1983. These contradictions were not ideological but political in character, revolving around personalities rather than issues. Sometimes they permeated into ethnic and provincial domains where they became violent and susceptible to exploitation by the common enemy feeding into its proxy wars of counterinsurgency.

The death of Dr. John Garang de Mabior, the SPLM Chairman, the SPLA Commander-in-Chief, the first Vice President of the Republic of the Sudan and the President of the Government of Southern Sudan, in a tragic helicopter crash on 30 July 2005 deprived the SPLM and the people of southern Sudan of a moderate voice that could prevent the escalation of internal feuds. The new leadership of South Sudan, comprising two incompatible and uncompromising leaders, quickly sent the people of South Sudan into war. This erupted on 15 December 2013 and continues unabated except for a break following the IGAD-mediated peace agreement on resolution of the conflict in South Sudan (ARCISS) in August 2015.

What is the problem?

Many people, especially the so-called international development partners, erroneously believe that the problem is a personal rift between President Salva Kiir Mayardit and his former deputy in the leadership of the SPLM and the Government of South Sudan, Dr. Riek Machar Teny-Dhurgon. This could not be much further from the reality. Although, the two leaders indeed are factors at the secondary and tertiary levels of the contradiction, the fundamental contradiction underpinning the war in South Sudan is the centuries’ old condition of socio-economic and cultural backwardness of its people. Failure to address that fundamental contradiction was the driver of the southern Sudan people’s struggle against the different regimes that came and went in Khartoum since Sudan’s independence in 1956, including the war of national liberation spearheaded by the SPLM/A.

The independence of South Sudan did not change the nature of the contradiction, particularly following the paradigm shift the SPLM leadership undertook from revolution to right-wing neoliberalism in the dying days of the Cold War and the superpower rivalry in the Horn of Africa.

The shift transformed the SPLM leaders into an elitist class completely alienated from the masses of the people. This facilitated and accelerated the consummation of the liberal peace agreement with the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Khartoum in 2005, giving the SPLM full control of the subnational entity known as the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS). The SPLM leaders had no programme or strategy for managing the unfamiliar ground the CPA lobbed them onto i.e. to run the government and the state.

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GoSS had an annual budget of between five and six billion US dollars from its share of the oil revenues. However, the SPLM, the dominant and leading political party in GoSS, did not have a programme for addressing the social and economic development of South Sudan. The political, military and burgeoning commercial/business elite that evolved in the context of the war economy plaited into a parasitic capitalist class; parasitic in that it did not command any means of production but derived its wealth consequent to its control of the state and its resources through the agency of corruption and outright theft from state coffers. Instead of providing development and social services, the members of this class dolled themselves in self-aggrandisement that they christened 'payback time' in a political patronage system suggesting that the war of national liberation was about nothing but rent-seeking.

The SPLM leaders jettisoned the liberation era pledge to construct a society based on freedom, justice, fraternity and prosperity for all. Thus, corruption, tribalism, nepotism, impunity, insecurity and ethnic conflicts were the characteristic features of the interim period between 9 January 2005 and 9 July 2011 and only the general and genuine desire by the people for the successful implementation of the referendum on self-determination constituted the constraint that prevented an all-out eruption of violence. The political environment was tense and gearing towards a totalitarian dictatorship as President Salva Kiir erected oppressive tools in the SPLM system, exploiting people's patience as they waited to vote for independence.

A provision in the Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan (ICSS, 2005) stated that should the result of the referendum be in favour of independence, the ICSS would become the transitional constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, with amendments relevant to the changed status of South Sudan. Instead of following that provision, President Kiir ordered for the crafting of a completely new constitution that gave him excessive powers, making him an imperial president. Thus, South Sudan became independent on an undemocratic and oppressive transitional constitution in which power was concentrated in the presidency. President Kiir particularly liked the provision that he could fire his deputy, which was done specifically with the incumbent, Machar, in mind. The transitional constitution eroded all the rights and freedoms enshrined in the interim constitution. This marked the beginning of South Sudan's political troubles.

This development coincided with the upsurge of Dinka (Jieng) ethnic nationalism, with its ideology of hegemony and domination. The Dinka is the single largest nationality in South Sudan. The formation of the Jieng Council of Elders (JCE) - representing the social, economic and political interests of the Dinka people - as a power broker around Kiir's presidency was part of engineering a totalitarian political dispensation in the young republic. President Kiir used his executive powers in the JCE to paralyse the political functions of the SPLM, shifting power from the SPLM General-Secretariat through the office of the president (OP) to the JCE, which now evolved into a quasi-state institution.

At the economic level, the parasitic capitalist class in control of the state and its resources allied with East Africa's parasitic and global comprador capitalist class to extract and plunder South Sudan's natural resources, especially oil, gold and timber. This alliance witnessed massive capital flight from South Sudan to Kenya and Uganda and via these countries to Western financial houses, leaving the country in abject poverty. The South Sudan Pound lost value against foreign currencies from 2.5 to the US dollar in 2011 to 250 in 2018. The negative social and economic indices inspired political protests, demonstrations and opposition to the regime's oppressive policies in different parts of South Sudan. This raised the political temperatures within the top leadership of the SPLM, fuelling the power struggle between President Kiir and Vice President Machar, which reached a crisis point in July 2013 when the President dismissed his deputy.

IGAD mediation

In an extraordinary assembly of IGAD Heads of State and Government in Nairobi on 27 December 2013, the region decided to intervene to resolve the conflict in South Sudan. Unfortunately, unlike its experience of mediating the conflict between the Sudan and the SPLM, which ushered in the CPA, the region this time round shot itself in the foot. The four countries involved in the mediation (Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and the Sudan) each had their respective national economic, security and political interests in South Sudan. Uganda had the UPDF and Air Forces involved in the war on the side of Kiir's government. Sudan had its SPLM/A-North and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rebels operating from South Sudan with the support of Uganda. The Sudan also had its commercial interests as oil from South Sudan still transits through the Sudan to international markets.

The respective security, economic and political interests of these countries created an environment of competition among them and therefore interfered in their collective efforts to resolve the conflict. The regional mediation of the South Sudan conflict was flawed in many aspects. The negotiation modality involved many stakeholders on the principle of inclusivity when only two parties, namely the SPLM in government and the SPLM/A in the opposition, were fighting the war. The mediation advanced the formation of the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) before sealing the agreement. This introduced the issue of power sharing, which was like placing the cart before the horse. After sixteen months of intermittent negotiation, there was an Agreement on the Resolution of Crisis in South Sudan (ARCISS), which the SPLM/A (IO) and other parties signed on 17 August, and which Salva Kiir reluctantly signed on 26 August.

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The agreement provided for power sharing between the SPLM in government (Kiir, 53%), the SPLM/A in the opposition (Machar, 33%), the SPLM political leaders or individual arrested and detained in the wake of the violence on 15 December 2013 (7%) and the other 18 registered political parties (7%). It took eight months before the parties started implementing the peace agreement. This was partly due to the government's reluctance and intransigence and partly due to the weakness demonstrated by the mediators, the peace guarantors and the international community to bring pressure to bear on President Kiir to enable the operationalisation of ARCISS instruments. The body formed to oversee and supervise the implementation, the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation

Commission (JMEC) chaired by former Botswana President Festus Mogae, proved ineffective in the face of procrastination, bullying and outright defiance by government functionaries. The transitional government of national unity (TGoNU) was formed on 29 April 2016 before the amended constitution incorporating ARCISS was promulgated, rendering it difficult to operationalise.

In addition to the difficulties President Kiir erected to frustrate TGoNU functions, a rebellion was brewing in Dr. Machar's party. Taban Deng Gai, who was the SPLM/A (IO)'s chief negotiator, was not pleased that Riek Machar had denied him the petroleum portfolio in the TGoNU. He shifted allegiance to President Kiir in a conspiracy that triggered the fighting in the presidential palace on 8 July 2016, rekindling the war and precipitating the collapse of the TGoNU as well as the ARCISS. President Kiir later appointed Taban Deng Gai as the first vice president in lieu of Dr. Machar. This was a flagrant violation of ARCISS.

The US Secretary of State, John Kerry, during a visit to Nairobi later in the month, forced the IGAD Council of Ministers to recognise the *de facto* new situation in South Sudan. The United States had played a pivotal role in the consummation of the CPA and in the conducting of the referendum on self-determination that eventually led to South Sudan's independence. The region therefore could not effectively intervene to stop the deteriorating humanitarian situation caused by the escalation of the war, which now engulfed the hitherto peaceful areas in Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal consequent to the emergence and proliferation of armed opposition groups. This situation continued until finally in June 2017, the JMEC Chair, Mr. Festus Mogae, finally admitted that ARCISS was fatally disabled and required revitalisation.

Revitalisation of ARCISS

The intricacy of diplomacy renders difficult the interpretation and operationalisation of certain terminologies. In the current context of South Sudan, "the revitalisation of ARCISS" is meaningless as it is not be feasible without Dr. Machar, who has been holed up in South Africa since November 2016 on the advice of US Secretary of State John Kerry. Since the 30-month ARCISS transition period is almost expiring, the IGAD mediators should have started a new peace process involving the newly formed political and armed opposition groups. However, IGAD proceeded with their plan to consult and draw an agenda for the revitalisation of ARCISS. This agenda included a meeting in December 2017 to recommit the parties to the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. The parties signed the agreement on 21 December, but it never came into force because the government started its dry season military offensive to regain the territories under the armed opposition in Equatoria and Jonglei. This caused further humanitarian crises, with people streaming into Ethiopia and Uganda to seek refuge.

The second phase of the revitalisation process commenced on 4 February 2018 and was expected to continue until 16 February. The objectives of this phase are: a) restore the permanent ceasefire; b) achieve full and inclusive implementation of ARCISS; and c) develop a revised and realistic timeline and implementation schedule towards democratic elections at the end of the transitional period.

These are unrealistic objectives. First, the government has demonstrated a complete lack of interest in sharing power with the opposition. Secondly, the mediators have failed to deploy the 4,000-strong Regional Protection Force from Rwanda and Ethiopia that would have provided security for Juba and other major towns. Thirdly, the armed opposition, the SPLM/A (IO), provides no military threat to the government because of an undeclared arms embargo imposed on it and the incarceration of its leader in South Africa. Fourthly, the transitional period that ARCISS provided ends in May 2018, which is the beginning of the rainy season in South Sudan. Even if it was possible to conduct elections during the rainy season, it would be a futile exercise as there are more than four million South Sudanese living in refugee camps in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, the Central African

Republic and DR Congo. It would not be possible to bring them back to partake in elections in such a short time. Fifthly, assuming that the high-level revitalisation forum ends in an agreement, a new transitional period must factor in reconciliation and must enable the repatriation and resettlement of refugees.

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The revitalisation process is therefore a tall order in terms of the commitment of the IGAD region, the African Union and other interested parties to enforce the implementation of the resultant agreement. It would also require walking the extra diplomatic and political mile to force President Kiir and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni to accept the agreement and its implementation in the letter and spirit in which the parties negotiated and agreed to it.

The entire process reeks of liberal peacemaking. The usual shortcoming of liberal peacemaking is that it leaves the regime intact. The superficial reforms it provides rarely impact the character and essence of the regime and end up recreating the conditions for renewed conflict. The 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement between the May regime of Gaafar Nimeri and the South Sudan Liberation Movement of Joseph Lagu created the conditions for the formation of the SPLM/A and the war of national liberation (1983-2005). The CPA created the conditions for the ongoing wars in the Sudan and South Sudan. Other examples exist in Mozambique, Angola and Cambodia. Therefore, whatever agreement the interested parties may come up with, the people of South Sudan should receive it with caution.

What then is the solution to the conflict in South Sudan?

A national democratic revolution

The plethora of problems afflicting the people of South Sudan are typical of when a people emerge from a war of national liberation or from colonial bondage. These problems obtained, and even continued to multiply, in South Sudan because the SPLM leaders decided to construct and maintain neocolonial relations with global comprador capitalism in order to perpetuate the system of extraction and plunder of South Sudan's natural resources. This has left the country bankrupt and in economic meltdown while the people have been pauperised.

The essence of the war of national liberation that the SPLM spearheaded was to develop and free the national productive forces from any kind of foreign interference and domination. In this context, the SPLM hitherto counted as one of the forces of national democratic revolution in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. However, the socio-economic and political developments in South Sudan since 2005 have demonstrated that the SPLM leaders have jettisoned the liberation pledge they made in 1983 and abandoned the path to national democratic revolution.

Until we successfully carry out a national democratic revolution for the social, economic and political development of our people, these problems will endure. We have to complete the national democratic revolution by implementing its programme in the social, economic and political spheres. We must construct a national democratic state that emancipates our people from the poverty, ignorance, political and ideological illiteracy, and superstition, which if left alone, could pop up in different forms: ethnic chauvinism and bigotry; religious, gender and racial discrimination; nepotism and favouritism; electoral fraud; political exclusion; and economic marginalisation and exploitation. These could quickly become the drivers of future conflict.

However, while the conditions and chances for successfully carrying out a revolutionary armed struggle are getting dimmer because of internal and external factors, the masses have at their disposal the option of non-violent means of struggle to win back their basic rights and fundamental freedoms.

Notwithstanding their political weaknesses and lack of organisation, the forces of the national democratic revolution exist in South Sudan in social groups, civil society and community-based organisations, and in the political parties and armed opposition. Some of these are actively participating in daily social and economic struggles and some may be hibernating, waiting for the opportune time. The tools for national democratic revolution range from what already exists now in the form of waging a revolutionary armed struggle, to demonstrations and processions, sit-ins and civil disobedience in towns and cities. We tried these methods successfully before in the popular uprising against the first military government of Ibrahim Abboud and Jaafar Nimeiri's totalitarian dictatorship in Sudan.

However, while the conditions and chances for successfully carrying out a revolutionary armed struggle are getting dimmer because of internal and external factors, the masses have at their disposal the option of non-violent means of struggle to win back their basic rights and fundamental freedoms. It is imperative to complete the national democratic revolution and the construction of the national democratic state to address social and economic development, as well as the secondary contradictions inherent in the ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural multiplicities of South Sudan. This is necessary whether or not the IGAD-led revitalisation of ARCISS succeeds in forcing the parties - through diplomatic arm-twisting by development partners - to agree to a power-sharing timeline and some reforms in the system.

In conclusion, the people of South Sudan are in such a dire social, economic and humanitarian situation that there is no time to waste in sterile debates about power-sharing and reforms of a system that has become, as Dr. Garang used to say of the government in Khartoum, "too deformed to be reformed". It is about time the patriotic democratic social and political forces pulled together to salvage the country and its people.

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