



FISHING FOR FRIENDS: Salva Kiir's cynical flirtation with regional bodies

By Peter Adwok Nyaba



On 8 March 2018, the Arab League's Council of Ministers rejected South Sudan's application for membership in the League. South Sudan's curious application for membership in the Arab body raises eyebrows as the country is neither predominantly Muslim nor Arab. Besides, only eight out of the League's twenty-two members are African countries; of these, seven countries (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia) are predominantly Muslim countries where Arabic is the official language. (Somalia is the only Arab League member where Arabic ceased to be an official language when the Somali language and script became more widely used officially in the 1970s.) So in terms of both religion and language, we can confidently conclude that South Sudan does not meet the conditions for membership in the Arab League.

The Republic of South Sudan ceased to be part of the Arab League when it attained independence from the Sudan in July 2011. The idea of joining the Arab League is something that never crossed the minds of most South Sudanese, including the pro-Arab Muslim minority.

The news of the rejection of South Sudan's application came as a surprise to many South Sudanese – not because South Sudan was rejected but because nobody contemplated the application itself. This

speaks volumes about how the government of President Salva Kiir could have undertaken such an important national security matter in complete secrecy. It also suggests that the people of South Sudan would not have accepted the idea of joining the Arab League, which explains the secrecy surrounding the process until the Council of Ministers broke the news. Internal as well as external national socio-economic and political/security priorities dictate membership in multilateral and regional organisations. States seek membership in multilateral organisations to satisfy their economic, security or political needs.

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Perhaps the regime operatives confused the Arab League with the Organisation of Islamic States (OIS), which many South Sudanese Muslims would be upbeat about joining. It is, therefore, a flabbergasting turn of events that the government wants the people of South Sudan to become part of the Arab world after nearly seven decades of resisting Arab identity.

One outstanding cause for South Sudan's secession was the definition of the Sudan along the two parameters of Islam and Arab culture. The Arab-dominated northern political elite also considered the Sudanese nationality as a transition to full integration into Arab nationhood. The first civil war (1955-1972) was secessionist in character while the second civil war (1983-2005) was for the radical transformation of the Sudanese polity.

As a nascent state, emerging from two decades of war of national liberation, South Sudan exhibited extreme conditions of fragility and instability. Its internal stability, therefore, depended on the socio-economic and political engineering processes that the government undertook internally, as well as the external diplomatic relations it constructed.

Upon attaining independence, South Sudan immediately acquired membership at the United Nations, the African Union and the regional Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). However, the internal socio-political stability could not hold and the nascent state descended into a civil war barely three years into its independence. This disturbed its internal legitimacy and so it had to rely on external legitimacy to maintain its equilibrium. This equilibrium hinged precariously on an oppressive kleptocratic totalitarian regime comprising a network of parasitic patrons and clients that fed on the dwindling oil revenues. The longer the civil war lasted, the more the system witnessed internal instability trending towards failure and collapse.

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The internal instability of the system triggered frenetic efforts to save itself. In 2016 and 2017, the system shopped for symbiotic associations as a strategy to keep itself afloat. The East Africa Community (EAC), in a hushed process, admitted the Republic of South Sudan as a member in 2017. There was no internal debate in South Sudan to endorse the application for membership in the EAC. The government of the Republic of South Sudan denied the people the opportunity to conscientise the community and its institutions. The process was rushed through the National Assembly in the heavy presence of national security officers to intimidate the legislators to meet the deadline for joining the East Africa Community Parliament. President Salva Kiir issued a republican decree appointing nine South Sudanese, all members of the ruling SPLM party (two incumbent presidential

advisors and others occupied different positions in the government), to the EAC's Legislative Assembly.

South Sudan could have been a founding member of the EAC had the British colonial administration not reversed its 1946 policy, which aimed at annexing southern Sudan to the then British East Africa. The East African countries of Uganda, Kenya and to some extent Tanzania, welcomed Southern Sudanese refugees in the first (1955-1972) and second (1983-2005) civil wars. Many of them studied and obtained skills and academic degrees in East African universities.

However, the cultural integration of ordinary South Sudanese, particularly those hailing from Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile subregions, into the East Africa Community will not be without pains and difficulties. They are oriented towards Sudanese culture with Arabic cultural and religious streaks. Nevertheless, the economic and political interests of the parasitic capitalist class in South Sudan dictated joining the East Africa Community.

In the same vein as the EAC process, the Republic of South Sudan joined the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) in 2017. This came at a time of great social, economic and political stress in the country, the result of the civil war and the dire humanitarian situation that produced two to three million South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, DR Congo, Central African Republic, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya.

Tens of thousands of internally displaced South Sudanese are living in squalid conditions in UN-protected areas, while many others are scattered in inaccessible bushes and swamps. The economy has collapsed - people cannot find a day's meal without international humanitarian intervention. Some ministers in the government, members of the National Legislature and senior bureaucrats who did not send their families to cities in East Africa now prefer to send their families to refugee camps.

The government of South Sudan assented to the ICGLR Protocol on Non-Aggression and Mutual Defence Pact Art 2 (106) as a survival mechanism. It is an instrument to enable the regime to obtain political security and military support from the region and from the US administration. In fact, the regime's most important expectation of this regional support is its declaration of the SPLM/SPLA (IO) and all opposition groups opposed to Salva Kiir and his regime as "negative forces".

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In this context of political survival, President Kiir has tied South Sudan to the imperialist security projects in Africa, which purportedly are aimed at combating international terrorism. However, this strategy has allowed for the extraction and plunder of minerals and other resources in the Great Lakes Region.

Exclusive clubs

Poignant to the questions I have raised above is whether or not the regional multilateral organisations, such as the EAC, IGAD, the Arab League and AU, remain exclusive clubs for leaders who have little impact on the lives of the people in their respective constituent countries. In the Horn and Great Lakes Regions of Africa, civil wars rage in South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, DR Congo and to some extent Burundi. These wars have triggered dire humanitarian consequences; there have been large-scale human displacements and migrations to neighbouring countries with serious economic and security implications for the host countries and communities. Nevertheless, we only

see the United States, in cohort with the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Norway and the European Union, engaged in trying to quell these wars or meet the humanitarian needs of the internally displaced and the refugees. The regional multilateral organisations are completely absent in this endeavour.

The leaders of these regional multilateral bodies hold periodic summits and issue communiqués after every summit that declare that they “remain seized” on South Sudan’s particular situation. Does the suffering of the people not freak out the conscience of these leaders, particularly leaders of the countries that are also experiencing civil war? I am not sure if the Arab League has ever discussed the conditions in Somalia since civil war erupted in 1991. Why then would the Arab League be concerned about South Sudan, which is a predominantly Christian, non-Arab country?

The news of South Sudan application to join the Arab League took many citizens of South Sudan by surprise. This is partly because one of the strong points for the southern Sudanese to secede from the Sudan was on account of the Arab-dominated northern Sudanese political elite’s definition of Sudan along the two parameters of Islam and Arab culture. Not just that, but also because they considered Sudanese nationality as a transition to full integration of the Africans in the Sudan into Arab nationhood,

The collapse of the agreement on the resolution of the conflict in South Sudan (ARCISS) leading to the escalation of war and proliferation of opposition groups created other dynamics in the search for peace in South Sudan. The IGAD sponsored high-level revitalisation (HLRF) of the collapsed ARCISS did not make headway. The process kicked off in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in December 2017 and brokered a cessation of hostilities agreement (COH). However, before the ink could dry, the government army violated the COH signed in Addis Ababa just before Christmas 2017, suggesting that the government was not interested in peace.

The violation of COH solicited unsavoury reaction from the US administration. On 26 January this year, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, called the South Sudan government of President Salva Kiir an “unfit partner” of the United Nations. These strong words speak to the growing rift between the US Government and the regime in Juba.

Egypt is only interested in the Nile waters, and has been threatening a war with Ethiopia on account of the Great Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile. South Sudan is the weakest link, militarily speaking, in this confrontation, and therefore through it, membership in the Arab League would render its territory a buffer zone in the service of Egypt, the League’s most influential member.

It is worth mentioning that the Bush administration helped midwife the process that allowed the people of Southern Sudan to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination. The Obama administration had been instrumental in supporting the regime in Juba, including the continued incarceration in South Africa of Dr. Riek Machar, the leader of the armed SPLM/A (IO), in the vain belief that Riek’s absence from the region would help bring peace. This IGAD Council of Ministers Communique of 26 March echoed this belief by predicating Riek’s release on the opposition leader and former Vice President renouncing violence.

We view South Sudan’s application for membership in the Arab League in the context of the civil war in the country and the growing international isolation of Salva Kiir’s regime. South Sudan has no strategic interests in the Arab League. Therefore, the application must be viewed in the context of Kiir’s political survival in the vacuum created by the withdrawal of US support to his regime. It was

a strategy to obtain other kinds of support in case the US administration pressures Kiir's main supporter in the region, President Yoweri Museveni, to urge him to leave office.

In addition, South Sudan has an outstanding "defence pact" with Egypt to the chagrin of both the Sudan and Ethiopia. Both Egypt and Uganda have been involved in chaotic attempts to reunify the factions of the SPLM, a process started jointly in 2014 by Tanzania's Chama Cha Mapinduzi and South Africa's African National Congress.

Therefore, admission of South Sudan into the Arab League on the recommendation of Egypt smacks of the nineteenth century Egyptian colonial adventure in the Sudan. Egypt is only interested in the Nile waters, and has been threatening a war with Ethiopia on account of the Great Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile. South Sudan is the weakest link, militarily speaking, in this confrontation, and therefore through it, membership in the Arab League would render its territory a buffer zone in the service of Egypt, the League's most influential member. The people of South Sudan are therefore right in welcoming the rejection of South Sudan's application for membership in the Arab League.

The next phase

President Salva Kiir did not have to subject the people of South Sudan to such national embarrassment. The 98.7% vote for secession in the referendum on self-determination in January 2011 was South Sudan's march out of the Arab League. In fact, President Salva Kiir did not need to apply for membership in the Arab League had he implemented, without unnecessary hitches, the IGAD-brokered agreement on the resolution of conflict in South Sudan (2015).

The IGAD high-level revitalisation process (HLRF) is another opportunity for the people of South Sudan to make peace and return to stability and reconciliation. The third phase of HLRF kicked off in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, immediately after the Easter season. It is incumbent on all to give peace a chance.

The people of South Sudan have not seen meaningful peace since the nineteenth century European incursion, occupation, wars of pacification and the civil wars. The sticking point has been power-sharing and security sector reforms. It is imperative to undertake security sector reform in terms of effectiveness, proficiency and ethnic configuration. However, power-sharing during the transition and the elections are not the solution to the fundamental contradiction in the conflict.

President Kiir and his government, on the one hand, and the political and armed opposition, on the other, have to begin to think outside the box. The IGAD region or the international community will not bring peace to South Sudan. Only the people of South Sudan in their different social and political formations will bring peace if they so wish.

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The role of the region and the international community is only facilitation, nothing more. The focus, therefore, of the HLRF should not be on power-sharing but rather on how to get South Sudan and its people out of the social, economic and political avalanche. It requires a scientific understanding of the real issues facing South Sudan. This will enable the crafting of a comprehensive political programme to address the socio-economic and cultural backwardness of the people of South Sudan that play out as poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and superstition, all of which have fuelled the conflict. This requires a national government based on competence and knowledge of issues and bound only

by the completion of the agreed programme to revive the economy, promote social and economic development and build physical infrastructure (roads, bridges, electric power generating plants, communication systems, etc).

It does not require patriotism to think outside the box. The situation demands both patriotism (love of the country and its people) as well as the courage to think outside the box. In his own words, President Salva Kiir, while swearing in the new Minister of Finance, admitted, *“The country is broke, the pound has lost its value and South Sudanese have become the laughing stock everywhere.”* These are words of the incumbent president not somebody in the opposition aspiring to replace him.

What then are we waiting for? It must be clear to all and sundry that the onus of saving the country lies in our hands. We will succeed to save this country only if we think and act outside the box. It is now or never.

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