



HORN OF AFRICA BULLETIN

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South Sudan

The peace that never was

Prior to mid-December 2013, South Sudan was thought by most observers to be a “post-conflict” country firmly on the (internationally mandated) statebuilding path. Since then, observers and South Sudanese alike have been surprised and horrified by the speed and severity of the disintegration of the nascent state. Yet, such a breakdown was not entirely unexpected, and indeed had been the subject of dire predictions, particularly following President Salva Kiir’s sudden dismissal of his entire cabinet in July 2013.

At that time, many in the region nervously agreed with Rift Valley Institute researcher Aly Verjee’s warning that “the real political drama is still to come: the next meeting of the SPLM political bureau and, eventually, the party convention.”¹ These events were to determine the SPLM’s chairperson and presidential nominee going into national elections set for 2015.² A number of senior party officials, including several of those dismissed in July, were believed to be planning to run against President Kiir for the chairperson position and presumptive presidency, setting the stage for open challenge to Kiir’s authority on a level previously unseen.

As it turned out, things came to a head even sooner than expected. Quite a bit of space on news websites, blogs, Twitter, and other media has been devoted to the cascade of events beginning on 15 December 2013 that ultimately led to the current state of crisis; that analysis won’t be rehashed here.³ Suffice it to say that the initial showdown has exploded into a violent and deadly mix of political rivalries and grudges, frustration and agitation among armed actors (many of whom were nominally part of – but never fully incorporated into – the Sudan People’s Liberation Army), cycles of violence and revenge between families and communities, and overall power struggles from the ground level to the highest echelons of national government.

Over 200,000 people were displaced by the conflict by early January 2014;⁴ by late March, that number had increased five-fold, including an estimated 803,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 255,000 refugees fleeing to neighbouring

countries.⁵ The size, scope, and severity of the crisis have led the UN to declare it a “Level 3” humanitarian emergency, parallel to (most recently) Syria and post-cyclone Philippines, and to issue strongly-worded predictions that the levels of displacement and livelihoods devastation combined with the impending rainy season could very well lead to famine by the end of this year.

The millions of South Sudanese citizens who have invested their lives and dreams of a better future along with the donors who have invested millions of dollars in South Sudan’s “post-conflict” development are now watching their hopes slip away. There is debate among international observers about whether this situation constitutes a reigniting of civil war for South Sudan, similar to the conflict that preceded the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and subsequent independence in 2011, and how that could have happened under the noses of so many (supposedly) influential actors (at least nominally) committed to preventing exactly that kind of disintegration. Regardless of that debate, the far more important question is how South Sudan can pull itself back from the brink of further unravelling, and how international actors can best encourage and sustain realistic steps toward lasting stability.

There are no easy answers here, not least because underneath the vexation about this sudden and supposedly unforeseen return to conflict lies another complex and challenging question: prior to December 2013, was South Sudan ever really at peace?

Understanding Jonglei beyond ethnicity

That question is couched in more than a desire to further complicate an already extraordinarily “wicked” problem⁶. The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) South Sudan programme, part of a six-year study funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid looking at livelihoods, state capacity, and state legitimacy in seven conflict-affected countries, has been working since 2012 to better understand livelihoods and governance in Jonglei state in eastern South Sudan. Jonglei is geographically the largest, and often said to be the most remote and least developed, state in the country; it has also been perhaps the most restive, with ongoing violence stemming from cattle raiding, non-state organized armed groups, military operations of various kinds, and conflict between ethnic groups.⁷

Partly because of its remoteness and lack of infrastructure, Jonglei remains relatively under-studied and poorly understood, yet it has always been something of a bellwether of South Sudan’s development and stability (or lack thereof). The South Sudanese government must demonstrate to its citizens as well as donors that it has the ability to respond effectively to ongoing conflict within its borders. More broadly, it must be able to address the drivers of those conflicts such that there are better options available to would-be violent actors than to perpetuate the cycles of violence that continue to decimate life and livelihoods across large swaths of the country. Such violence in Jonglei and elsewhere is driven by a complex web of actors, relationships, and dynamics which are not well understood either inside or outside of South Sudan. Yet the events in Jonglei, Juba and elsewhere in the past few months have only further confirmed that the government’s capacity to respond to these complex threats is still severely lacking, and that the need for greater comprehension of the underlying issues and potential responses to them is ever more urgent.⁸

Jonglei has long been home to shifting internal dynamics, relationships and loyalties among ethnic groups and political actors, which have made its conflict and development trajectories quite difficult to chart, much less to predict and stabilise.⁹ The three largest ethnic groups in the state – Dinka, Nuer, and Murle – have historically engaged in periodic violence and raids against one another, largely for the purpose of cattle theft and the establishment of (young male) raiders’ dominance, wealth, and social status within their own groups, as well as vengeance for previous attacks.

The local populations we have interviewed for SLRC project thus far noted, as have scholars and observers, that the nature, frequency and intensity of such violence have shifted in recent decades, and are continuing to evolve as new influences and conflict drivers have emerged from the civil war and its aftermath since 2005. One of many challenges to making sense of conflict in Jonglei and other states is that it is often described simply as ethnic¹⁰ or ‘tribal’, yet such descriptors capture only part – if any – of the forces at work. The dynamics and purposes of cattle raiding vary according to group norms not only within ethnic groups but also within subgroups such as clans and age-sets, and have also shifted markedly over time as traditional authorities have lost influence and militarised mindsets, tactics and weaponry rooted in the war have continued to pervade ‘peace’ time. As a result, extreme and indiscriminate violence has become more commonplace since the CPA, and made ‘traditional’ raiding attacks more difficult to differentiate from other types of social and political conflict.

Ethnic group loyalties are often said to explain the underpinnings of national power struggles, as well. While they may indeed influence support for government figures such as President Salva Kiir (Dinka from Warrap State) and former Vice President Riek Machar (Nuer from Unity State), as well as other actors, including rebel leaders such as David Yau Yau (Murle from Pibor County in southern Jonglei), group membership is certainly not the only determinant of political loyalty, and such explanations of South Sudan’s highly complex political dynamics are oversimplifications at best. This is even, if not especially, true of the current (2013-14) crisis.

This crisis has been widely represented as ethnically motivated, and has obvious ethnic dimensions, yet was largely triggered by a political challenge to the authority of President Kiir led by a coalition of prominent political actors from various ethnic groups, including Kiir’s own. Conflict in Jonglei and throughout the country is driven and clouded by historical and current perceptions of discrimination and marginalisation, as well as by stereotypes and biases between and among groups, ethnic or otherwise. Ethnicity must not be understood as the central or only issue.¹¹

A failure of governance

Conflict is also driven by numerous factors related to governance and the state’s capacity and willingness (or lack thereof) to intercede against and mitigate violence and its drivers. The Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GoSS) has not yet established law and order or functional security and justice sectors. It focused, instead, on numerous other complex issues: the transition of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A) from decades of being a rebel movement with a strict militaristic hierarchy – simultaneously rife with internal discord and fragmentation – to being the governing political party and standing national army in a nascent democracy; the absorption of numerous dissident leaders and stakeholders into a ‘large tent’¹² of national political unity; ongoing struggle with Sudan over various issues; and a host of other internal challenges, including the temporary shutdown of oil production, and huge gaps in infrastructure, service delivery and institutions.

With these challenges come significant internal contradictions, including a bloated military that often lacks authority over its soldiers but was long unable to shed volume for fear of backlash; violent and ineffective civilian disarmament campaigns; and widespread impunity for violence and corruption. Additionally, there is the fact that the SPLM is essentially a fractious rebel movement which had to relatively quickly reframe itself as a governing political party. While it was perhaps much more internally well-organized for such purposes than many rebel movements going into independence, its basic *raison d’être* was fundamentally different for most of its existence than it has been since the CPA and independence.¹³ Old habits are hard to break, and require tremendous political will in addition to know-how

and resources. The international community has eagerly – if perhaps somewhat impatiently – supplied a significant amount of the latter (partly in hopes that it could influence better habits), but it is now all too clear that its influence is far smaller than donors wish. GoSS has remained far – and now only moved further – from surmounting these hurdles in its short history.

A central challenge is that stability is both the desired outcome of current state-building efforts, but it is also the necessary prerequisite. Large-scale infrastructure such as transportation and telecommunications systems, effective state institutions, and the provision of security are – however tautologically – rather essential precursors to their own construction. Some measure of progress can be made without, for example, good roads and transportation access around the country, or effective security, but such progress will almost certainly be much slower and more easily undermined than either South Sudanese or donors desire.

The ambiguous role of donors, international community

Donor response to South Sudan's independence has been substantial, though it must be noted that history is full of examples from around the world demonstrating that aid effectiveness is not necessarily proportional to quantity (and in fact may be more disproportionate than either donors or recipients generally acknowledge). Tens of thousands of international advisors, UN military and civilian personnel, NGO workers, diplomatic and donor agency staff and private contractors, as well as billions of dollars in pledged aid, have poured into South Sudan since 2005.

The UN alone has over 10,000 personnel in South Sudan and a broad mandate that includes the potential use of force to protect civilians, but it faces its own capacity and security challenges that have precluded effective and sustainable conflict intervention. Their general focus is on supporting South Sudan's transformation into a peaceful and effective state, based largely on state-building theory that equates state visibility and service delivery with effective governance and state legitimacy.

These are not, however, neutral actors. Each brings its own set of approaches, relationships, motivations and historical understandings to its dealings with GoSS, local leaders and communities, and with them, particular sets of dynamics and logistics that must be managed by all involved, which is tremendously time-consuming, to say the least. The (large) extent to which it has become a lightning rod for both GoSS and South Sudanese civilian frustration and anger in recent months may demonstrate the weakness of such theory as well as the frailty of the UN's relationship with the state.

In the meantime, other types of external actors with very different motivations, such as the Government of Sudan, have been both passively and actively involved in South Sudan's internal conflicts at various times since 2005, up to and including the present crisis. Ongoing disputes over border demarcation, oil revenues, and contested territories such as Abyei have kept both Sudan's and South Sudan's governments politically occupied and required significant domestic and international diplomatic pressure to resolve – or at least defer – disputes peacefully.

Some regional governments have also intervened militarily, whether by supplying arms and resources to South Sudanese rebels, as Sudan is widely believed to have done,¹⁴ to providing crucial manpower and firepower to GoSS in its current fight against various armed groups that have splintered from the SPLA since late 2013, in the case of Uganda.¹⁵ These many kinds of external forces, both benevolent and oppositional, have generally had minimal physical presence on the ground in Jonglei and other states, but all of them shape South Sudan's political, social and conflict dynamics in numerous – and often-fluctuating, if not contradictory – ways.

It is against this backdrop that the young state of South Sudan is charged with providing effective security for its population, ending armed conflict within its borders and creating the peace and stability that citizens and other stakeholders

demand. The ongoing political crisis of 2013-14 makes it only more pressing that all possible efforts and resources be put toward realizing this vision of a peaceful and stable nation, yet it pushes that goal only further beyond the reach of South Sudan's citizenry.

The donors investing in that goal must also invest in understanding the complexity of the situation underlying it as well as potential responses, if any true progress is to be made. While popular narratives reduce Jonglei's and South Sudan's conflict to lack of services, competition for resources or 'tribal' animosities, there is no simple or definitive explanation, or any obvious roadmap for 'rebuilding' a peace that, in reality, many South Sudanese have never known. It is only clear that a different approach than that of the post-CPA and independence period is now urgently needed.

Rachel Gordon is a Researcher and Program Manager for the SLRC South Sudan and Uganda programmes at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University in Boston (USA). She holds M.A. degrees in urban policy & planning and international affairs from Tufts and its Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She can be reached at Rachel.Gordon@tufts.edu

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- 1 Verjee, Aly. "Thoughts on the Juba reshuffle" (29 July 2013). <http://africanarguments.org/2013/07/29/thoughts-on-the-juba-reshuffle-%E2%80%93-by-aly-verjee/>
 - 2 Elections are still slated for 2015, though the corollary need for a – currently unplanned and unfunded – national census to be completed in advance of polling makes them extremely unlikely to be carried out on the stated timeline, despite continued government assurances. See Mayai, Augustino, Abucha, Martin, and Jok, Jok Madut. *The 2015 National Census and Elections: An Analysis of President Kiir's Announcements*. Sudd Institute Policy Briefs (1 February 2014). Available at: <http://suddinstitute.org/publications/show/the-2015-national-census-and-elections-an-analysis-of-president-kiir-s-announcements/>
 - 3 For starters, see <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/nine-questions-about-south-sudan-crisis-guide-confused-observers> and <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/south-sudan-crisis-guide-confused-observers-ii>, <http://thinkafricapress.com/south-sudan/experts-weekly-south-sudan-violent-crisis>, coverage from the Sudd Institute and Rift Valley Institute,
 - 4 <http://www.usaid.gov/crisis/south-sudan/fy14/fs10>
 - 5 http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South_Sudan_Humanitarian_Snapshot_26Mar2014_FINAL.pdf
 - 6 A problem is "wicked" when its complexity, mutability, internal contradictions, and other characteristics make it difficult or impossible to resolve, and often even to recognize and define. The term was first noted by C. West Churchman in a guest editorial in *Management Science* (Vol. 14, No. 4, December 1967), and attributed to urban planning and design theorist Horst Rittel.
 - 7 Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is also the site of some of the earliest military defections and now seemingly uncontainable violence and armed opposition to the government following the political crisis of December 2013.
 - 8 Our recent working paper, "In the eye of the storm: an analysis of internal conflict in South Sudan's Jonglei State", attempts to help fill that gap.
 - 9 Mayai, Augustino Ting and Jok, Jok Madut. *Managing Violence in Jonglei*. Sudd Institute Policy Brief (9 November 2013). Available at <http://suddinstitute.org/publications/show/managing-violence-in-jonglei-a-test-of-legitimacy-and-credibility-in-juba/>
 - 10 We use the term "ethnic group" rather than "tribe," according to prevailing norms. We also note that any such terminology is problematic, yet inescapable in attempts to describe South Sudan's complex social fabric. Group affiliation is neither static nor neutral, as has become terribly clear in the past several months.
 - 11 For excellent discussion of these and related dynamics, see <http://www.riftvalley.net/event/south-sudan-peace-possible>
 - 12 Matthew, LeRiche, and Matthew Arnold, "South Sudan From Revolution to Independence" (London: Hurst and Company, 2012) p245.
 - 13 Blanchard, Lauren (2014). *The Crisis in South Sudan*. Congressional Research Service (9 January 2014). Available at: <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43344.pdf>
 - 14 Small Arms Survey (2012) 'My Neighbor, My Enemy: Intertribal Violence in Jonglei'. Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan, Sudan Issue Brief 21. Geneva: Small Arms Survey. Available at: http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/issue-briefs/HSBA-IB21-Inter-tribal_violence_in_Jonglei.pdf
 - 15 <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article50289>