

Reflections on the New Republic of South Sudan

Written by John Ashworth

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JOHN ASHWORTH, MAY 15 2012

On 9th July 2011, the Republic of South Sudan was born amidst great rejoicing and much hope. Independence Day was an amazing experience, the joy of freedom being very apparent on everybody's faces.

Just under a year later, as government and people strive to build a new nation, hope remains, as does national pride, but there are also dark clouds on the horizon.

In Juba, the national capital, there has been a great deal of progress. Tarmac roads and new buildings continue to appear. The road to the Ugandan border at Nimule has now been tarred. Mobile phone towers continue to spring up across the nation, and roads to most major towns are now "all weather". Nevertheless, it has to be said that development has been slow to reach the rural areas. The late Dr John Garang's exhortation to "take the city to the countryside" is not yet bearing fruit. Delivery of basic services such as education, health and clean water remains a major problem.

Setting up the institutions of government has continued, building on the good work done during the Interim Period of autonomy following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, but again this has been slower than many would like. Good governance remains a priority.

The unfinished business of the CPA has come back to haunt the new nation. Negotiations over oil broke down and South Sudan shut down oil production rather than transport its oil through Sudanese pipelines at what it considered to be an exorbitant rate (USD36 per barrel, more than 30 times the international standard of nearer USD 1) and allegations that Khartoum was illegally appropriating part of the oil. Negotiation on border demarcation also broke down. This is very important as much of the oil lies along the disputed border. Both sides used military force to occupy areas which they claimed (Khartoum occupying Jau, Juba occupying Heglig/Panthou), but for some reason international disapproval seemed to be stronger against Juba than Khartoum.

Abyei is a region which used to be in South Sudan but was transferred to the north in 1905. The CPA gave the people of Abyei a referendum to determine whether they wished to remain in the north or rejoin the south, but that referendum was blocked by Khartoum, which occupied Abyei militarily.

Sudan Armed Forces also attempted to occupy two areas which are clearly in Sudan but which were allied with South Sudan during the civil war. The people of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile feel that they are ethnically and culturally different from the dominant ruling group of Sudan, and have been marginalised and persecuted in the same way as South Sudanese (and indeed people from Darfur, another ongoing war in Sudan). They resisted military occupation very successfully, and so now Sudan has three separate civil wars as well as the brewing confrontation with South Sudan.

Sudan has declared that all citizens of South Sudanese origin must regularise their status (getting South Sudanese passports and then Sudanese visas) or leave the country. They do not have the option of obtaining Sudanese citizenship, even if they have spent many decades in the country or were even born there. They are being harassed by security forces and militia, and a humanitarian disaster is unfolding as they try to reach South Sudan, often having to leave behind all their possessions, their pensions, everything. At the same time, rebel militia, which operate in

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South Sudan and are being supported by Khartoum, are being given a free reign to abduct and forcibly recruit South Sudanese in Sudan.

The UN Security Council has now passed Resolution 2046 in an attempt to deal with many of these issues. It calls the parties back to the negotiating table, under the auspices of the African Union Higher Implementation Panel, and threatens sanctions if they do not resolve the issues. South Sudan has, as always, demonstrated its willingness to negotiate in good faith, but Sudan is still prevaricating. Experience shows that even when Khartoum negotiates and agrees to something, it is meaningless. A South Sudanese elder statesman, Abel Alier, wrote a book entitled "Too many agreements dishonoured", and that sums up the feelings of South Sudanese; every agreement they have ever signed with Khartoum has been abrogated, broken or, at best (in the case of the CPA), only partially implemented, delayed and undermined.

The oil shut-down is damaging the economies of both countries. In South Sudan prices are rising and shortages are beginning to bite. States near the border with Sudan are suffering particularly badly as Khartoum has stopped cross-border trade between the two countries. While Juba is negotiating loans based on the oil which is in the ground, and implementing austerity measures, nevertheless things will get worse before they get better. It will probably be at least three years before a new pipeline can be up and running through Kenya or Ethiopia.

One further problem is inter-communal violence within South Sudan. A traumatised people who have not really seen a peace dividend in terms of development, jobs or even the ability of the government to provide security and the rule of law quickly turn to cattle raiding. This has escalated beyond traditional conflict with women, children and the elderly being killed and mutilated and villages burned. The government has implemented a comprehensive programme to disarm civilians, has deployed thousands of troops in the worst-affected state to provide security, and initiated a peace process which culminated in a conference at the beginning of May 2012 in which all six communities in Jonglei State committed themselves to work for peace. Peace is not an event, it is a process, and it is important that the resolutions and recommendations of the conference should be implemented. These include development, which must be perceived as equitable by all communities.

While South Sudan is clearly facing great problems and even grave danger at the moment, there is still room for optimism. The people are resilient and determined, they are proud of their new nation, and they have a remarkable capacity for hope. The international community remains largely supportive of South Sudan, although recently they have shown themselves to be out of touch with the feelings of the population, and apparently do not understand the dynamics of recent events as seen by South Sudanese. That needs to be corrected quickly. Sudan, on the other hand, is led by an authoritarian regime which has its back to the wall and currently appears to be locked into a military mindset. Its leader, President Omar Hassan al Bashir, is unpopular because he "let the South go", is wanted by the International Criminal Court, and has been described by a Ugandan general as "a wounded hyena". Wounded hyenas are unpredictable and dangerous!

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