

Statebuilding Failure in South Sudan

Written by Roberto Belloni

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ROBERTO BELLONI, APR 17 2014

The Path to Violence

Violence broke out in South Sudan's capital of Juba on the 15th December 2013. Vice President Riëk Machar and his followers, mostly belonging to the Nuer tribal group, walked out of a meeting of the ruling SPLM party, prompting President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, to accuse Machar of plotting a coup d'état against him. The Presidential Guard hunted down Machar who, however, was able to escape from Juba. Dinka militia immediately began large-scale killings in the capital city of members of Machar's tribal group. Most Nuer soldiers and officers defected and joined thousands of Nuer youth, organized in the so-called White Army, in fighting the war against Kiir and in demanding his removal from office. Kiir, in addition to enjoying the support of the Dinkas, can benefit from the presence in the capital city of Ugandan troops dispatched to protect the President and his entourage, as well as to defend Ugandan economic interests in the country.

A turning point setting the context for the December outbreak of violence occurred few months earlier, in July, when Kiir fired Machar, along with his entire cabinet. Immediately afterwards, Kiir proceeded to purge both political members of the ruling SPLM and military officers: he disbanded entire sections of the party, removed allegedly disloyal members of the army, and restructured the Presidential Guard to include his supporters, mostly Dinka, from his native region. When Machar walked out of the SPLM meeting in December, the stage was set to move violently against the opposition. The conflict quickly escalated outside of Juba in a cycle of tribal violence, in particular in those oil-producing regions where Dinka and Nuer live next to one another. Fierce combat took place in the towns of Bentiu, Bor, and Malakal. The United Nations has accused both sides of perpetrating mass atrocities.

As a result, a humanitarian disaster is developing rapidly. Streets and mass graves are littered with bodies. More than 10,000 people are estimated to have died already. According to the United Nations, about 1 million people fled their homes. More than 75,000 of them have found refuge in UN compounds throughout the country. Tens of thousands more have escaped in remote swamplands far from the fighting, but with little opportunities to feed themselves. Humanitarian workers struggle to provide them with assistance and relief. About 3.7 million people, roughly one-third of the total population, are facing starvation. The crisis in South Sudan is currently ranked by the United Nations on par with Syria's (Cumming-Bruce 2014). With the beginning of the rainy season, the humanitarian situation is expected to worsen.

Obstacles to Statebuilding

When South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011, it was easy to predict that the path towards the construction of a legitimate and functioning state would have been full of obstacles (Belloni 2014). Not only did South Sudan emerge from five decades of intermittent war which left it with no economy, no infrastructure, and no ability to provide services to its citizens, but also it declared independence without resolving a number of problematic issues including, above all, the definition of borders and the sharing of oil resources with its powerful northern neighbour. At the same time, the readiness of the United States to recognize the creation of the new country, and to support it financially and politically, provided some optimism about the possibility South Sudan could overcome its enormous difficulties – in particular, northern intrusion in southern Sudanese politics.

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While the presence of an Islamist government in Khartoum has certainly not made statebuilding easier in Juba (Prunier 2014), the recent outbreak of violence has demonstrated that the most dangerous threat to stability and peace is internal. The friction between Dinkas and Nuers has characterized South Sudan's liberation struggle since 1955. South Sudan has about 9 million citizens, divided along tribal, clan, religious, and linguistic lines. The Dinka represent the relative majority in the country with about 35 per cent of the population, the Nuer follow with 15 per cent, and the Azande, Bari, and Hilluk with about 8 per cent. Real and perceived Dinka predominance has fuelled resentment among other groups, above the Nuer.

Although the current conflict has been developing along tribal lines, it is fundamentally based on a failure of leadership. Both Kiir and Machar – both profoundly ambitious men engaged in a personal power struggle – have contributed to creating the socio-economic conditions underpinning and fuelling the conflict. Since gaining independence, South Sudan has made little progress, if any, in establishing domestic institutions and improving the life conditions of Southern Sudanese citizens. With the silent complicity of international donors, the only institution attracting significant political and economic attention has been the Army. However, rather than leading to a policy of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, the post-independence period involved a continuing recruitment of soldiers – often organized in tribal units loyal to individual commanders. The number of generals in the SPLA (the military wing of the ruling SPLM) grew to 745, 41 more than in the four US services combined (de Waal 2014). While committing a large part of its spending to the military security apparatus, the government has done little to build a viable economy. Revenue from oil extraction constitutes almost the totality of government revenue, ranging between 97 and 98 per cent of the state budget. Besides oil, South Sudan still has no industry to speak of. While Juba has enjoyed some rapid post-independence development, rural areas (where more than 80 per cent of the population lives) did not see any change. Few roads have been built and many regions remain completely inaccessible during the rainy season. About 80 per cent of healthcare has been provided by international NGOs (many of which left the country since the conflict broke out). And, to increase the imbalance between the centre and the peripheries, massive corruption has blossomed. Prior to the December outbreak of violence, Kiir has even asked his own ministers to return \$4 billion they stole, as this money is needed for development programs.

Failing Endeavours to Ending the Conflict

Current efforts to stop the conflict seem to have little chance of succeeding – at least in the short term. Since December, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a group of seven East African states, has been attempting to sustain negotiations between the parties in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A January 23rd truce, however, has been repeatedly broken. IGAD has proposed to send a regional force composed of soldiers from Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi to provide “protection and deterrence,” but above all to secure crucial infrastructure such as oil installations. Machar, however, hopes to take over oil fields in order to force Kiir to step down (Davison 2014) and announced he will consider an IGAD force, if deployed, as hostile. According to French professor and Sudan analyst Gérard Prunier, in this context, negotiations between the parties have no possibility of leading to a settlement. Rather, only the military and diplomatic victory of one side over the other will terminate the war (Prunier 2014). Unfortunately, a swift and decisive military victory of either side is unlikely. Moreover, a military victory of one side or the other will have the obvious advantage of ending the killing and the displacement, but it would also set out a new cycle of claims and counter-claims, including armed rebellions. This is hardly a recipe for successful statebuilding.

Faced with a fast-developing humanitarian disaster, rights groups, conflict analysts, and some policy makers have called for greater international involvement to facilitate a political solution to the crisis. American diplomat Princeton Lyman, who has been instrumental in reaching the 2005 agreement between the two Sudans leading to Southern independence, has argued controversially that international actors should intervene decisively and put South Sudan under international custody (Lyman 2014). Lyman believes that only if steered by international leadership can domestic institutions be (re)built along democratic lines. International intervention during Namibian independence in 1990 and following the end of the war in Liberia in 2003 supposedly confirm the soundness of this policy advice.

The Need for Diplomacy and Bottom-up Solutions

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While the urgency of the situation on the ground makes calls for external intervention understandable, a sort of international protectorate is unlikely to provide the proper foundation for a new start. Rather than imposing top-down solutions with limited domestic legitimacy, international actors should adopt a broad peace strategy and involve both domestic actors (including civil society) and regional stakeholders to find an acceptable compromise. They should use all available diplomatic means to reach a political settlement, possibly involving a golden retirement for both Kiir and Machar, and move to support those reforms and programs unwisely set aside in the first two and a half years of independence, including the democratization of political institutions, the professionalization and downsizing of the military, the development of a viable (mostly) agricultural economy for the rural population, the provision of education and health care, and the development of communication and transport systems. Needless to say, this is a very demanding task requiring political skills and commitment.

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