

South Sudan – what to do?

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Reversing more than half a century of neglect, suffering and civil war should be our top priority now. In addition to the heartbreaking human toll taken over the years, we are also left with a combustible internal political scene. The reality is that may be the hardest challenge that we are faced with is - what to do?

A year old and we are beginning to be known as the problem country. Needless to say the problems are many. Poverty, diseases, famine, poor leadership, ethnic clashes and corruption are just a few of these problems. With each passing day the problems increase. It has been a series of disasters, with no recovering from any on sight, only to fall into another.

If one surveys the daunting economic, social and political problems that confront us now, it seems that millions of South Sudanese are thinking the unthinkable, regardless of whether we (South Sudanese) admit it openly or we do not, that the liberation & independence promise has in many respects faded away. South Sudan will never be the same, but it will not likely be what our people imagined it to be either.

Most South Sudanese are decent people. South Sudan fought for so long with the foundational beliefs of “dignity has to be restored to all South Sudanese”. This sentiment as little as it may be is still existing, but making it a reality is far more complex than anyone had imagined.

Our problems are the product of non-existing or underdeveloped state institutions, themselves the product of the current system’s failure to redefine itself from liberation movement to ruling party with a mandate to deliver services to the population. On the other hand there are no examples in post-colonial Africa of liberation movements that have managed this transition completely or successfully.

To show signs of performing leave alone in a better way, the system first will have to concern itself with governance and this is not a simple shift to make.

We are in a struggle over the transition of South Sudan to a different system that we do not know yet. We have to define the long-term objectives of what that system should be - in meaningful, but still very general terms. We do not have and cannot have a precise idea of appropriate structures for that better system we want to construct. And we should not pretend that we have.

In the short term we have to keep in the forefront of our minds that our task/ work is primarily to keep things from getting worse. It is to preserve gains already achieved, mainly our independence and not sliding back into an all-out South Sudanese civil war. Most important of all we must remember that in the middle run, we are living in a time of transition. In this transition, the issue is no longer whether or not we want to sustain the system, but what will replace it. And we have to work very hard and very uncompromisingly, to push in the direction of a more democratic and a more egalitarian system.

We cannot construct such a system in this middle term. What we can do is to make possible the multiple political activities that will end up tilting the balance in favor of a better organised and a far less noxious system.

The current system in its preoccupation with holding on to political power neglects the essential task of developing independent state institutions. There is no state-led training program for civil servants and most of these positions are given to political actors as thank you for services rendered in the independence struggle or for displaying personal loyalty. Hence South Sudan does not have a skilled and professional bureaucracy.

A very important reason why South Sudan will remain poor is the stranglehold of an archaic provincialism that now permeates all sectors of society. It is a mentality allergic to talent and merit and today especially fearful of the vast and well-educated South Sudanese diaspora.

Criticism within the system is rare, which allows poor performance and unethical behavior to go unsanctioned. We must discard the notion of; I deserve to do whatever I like, because I went to the bush. The oligarchical surrounding the system, tells itself what they think they wants to hear. Communities emerging from conflict need more results than noise, but even more importantly is that all actors see the need to act with humility.

The defining political issue of the moment in South Sudan, is government too big - a burden to our society? Or is it too ineffective a protector of less than average people, co-opted by the power of the gun and moneyed interests? Is it contributing to the general welfare of our people or is it institutionalising inequality, serving the few rather than the many?

However you slice it, the outlook/ answers are grim.

In the long term, the political challenge will be building a more equitable society that engages in peaceful nation-building that is law-abiding, transparent, democratic and inclusive of the diversity within our country.

Other countries in Africa such as Ghana, Botswana and further afield such as India have attained democracy despite social divisions, low literacy rates and poverty, etc.

In spite of all that we cannot rely on outsiders with a variety of agendas and motives, to challenge these vices for us. It must come from within us, with the support and solidarity of those who respect South Sudanese sovereignty & aspirations and have the best interest of all South Sudanese people at heart.

We have to remember that the outcome of the struggle during the present chaotic transition is not in any way inevitable, it probably has a fifty-fifty chance and will be influenced by the totality of the actions of people on both sides. One can define fifty- fifty as unfortunately low. I define it as a great opportunity, which we should not fail to try to seize.

To state the obvious political stability depends on economic and social security and for development to take place in South Sudan there must be peace, security and stability.

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