

The Appointment of Dr. Francis Deng as South Sudan's Permanent Representative to the UN: Lessons for the Government of South Sudan

Wednesday 5 September 2012

By Remember P.D.Miamingi

The Appointment of Amb. Francis Deng as South Sudan's Permanent Representative to the UN is, in my opinion, among the very few commendable appointments made by the government of the Republic of South Sudan(GOSS) in the most recent times. This is in no way said to cast any aspersion on the credibility, qualification or merit of the process and or the persons appointed by GOSS in time past. It is also not insinuated here that the mere accolades, knowledge, skills, expertise, experience and social capital of Dr. Deng are in themselves sufficient for a stellar discharge of the responsibilities of the assignment. But within the limitation of human knowledge and political consideration, this decision can easily pass as very rational, calculated political and diplomatic appointment.

As the Special Adviser to the UNSG on the Prevention of Genocide and other Mass Atrocities, Representative of the UNSG on Internally Displaced Persons, Sudan's former Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, former Ambassador to the US, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Canada, distinguished professor and fellow in the most exotic institutions and centers of academic excellence globally, Dr. Deng's credentials commend him for this mission. His success, however, being the eyes, ears and mouth of his government, will largely depend on his brief, on the content and direction of GOSS' foreign policy, as well as on the behavior of his principals back home.

Considering the composition and character of some of his principals, this is perhaps the most nationalistic, bold and courageous but, nonetheless, the most risky career decision of the veteran diplomat Dr. Deng. The Republic of South Sudan is still a mere geographical expression on a journey to peace, state and nation building. Some of the drivers in charge of this journey are learning basic driving skills on the highway. With serious institutional and human capacity challenges, pervasive indiscipline and belly politics, GOSS is still struggling to pull together a coherent, consistent and compelling national interest position on so many issues not to talk of a foreign policy position. One can only imagine how difficult it will be for this career diplomat to navigate his ways between the, sometimes, erratic behavior of our leaders and stated position in our foreign policy documents. But it is a challenge worth taking!

Lessons worth noting

Even though it is often said that the only lesson of history is that people don't learn from history, there are few points one cannot but underline here with respect to the appointment of Amb. Deng:

1. South Sudan has the natural and human resources required to turn it from a fourth world entity to a first world nation. The challenge we have is the will and ability to identify, appropriately utilize and strengthen resources' capacity to serve us better. Firstly, as I travel around the world, I meet South Sudanese professionals all over doing magnificently in their respective fields. They are cleaners, nurses, doctors, engineers, international public servants, lawyers, economists, accountants etc; all wanting to return and rebuild their country, but many are afraid of rejection by their very own. These fears are not unfounded. I have met on the roads and streets of Juba PhD holders and other professionals who have searched for jobs for months and who are now starting to relocate abroad.

Is it not high time GOSS pulled together all its Diaspora focused initiatives into one well funded and staffed national body tasked with the responsibility of identifying, classifying and matching South Sudanese professionals, their knowledge, skills, expertise, experience, with capacity gaps in government and non governmental institutions, and facilitate their return and strategic placement in the identified places? Is it not possible to use capacity strengthening initiatives, such as the one by IGAD for this purpose? This way partners would support capacity strengthening without engendering the feeling that 'we fought and the foreigners reap the fruit of our struggle'?

Secondly, it is not uncommon for former warlords to use government positions and privileges to reward war time loyalties, comrades, family members or secure business interest, etc, but it is possible to rationalize such a reward system. For instance, instead of recommending your cousin, who is nurse, as an ambassador, it is possible to first of all think if he might be best suited as a matron in the teaching hospital. The sometimes, irrational distribution of government positions and privileges is probably what is paralyzing the operations of the government more than any other challenges. For example, when one visits a government ministry, it seems as if at the end of the war someone blew a whistle announcing vacant seats in Juba and some people, depending on how fast they could run, their size or their height, sat on any befitting seat and only after sitting down they asked what this seat was meant for. Putting the right people in the right places irrespective of who they are, whom they know and where they come from is tough, but it's a hallmark of courageous leadership.

Thirdly, since we already have rectangles sitting in circles, undoing this will take time. Meanwhile, GOSS needs to put in place a comprehensive and systematic capacity strengthening program for all its employees. The first three months of employment should really be spend undergoing training, there should be on job training programs and debriefing at the point of exit.

2. Putting competency before clan makes political and economic sense: I can imagine that appointments such as that of Amb. Deng can garner such international goodwill that could result into very tangible diplomatic benefits for the country. No money and number of staff could replace Amb. Deng's goodwill, the value of his social capital or his knowledge of the international system. Given the power and space to operate, the country stands to benefit more from such appointments. One can only hope that such meritorious appointments will be extended to other missions and political capitals. Using our diplomatic missions to reward relatives, friends or push enemies out of the country costs the country enormously and make these diplomatic missions a little bit more than receptionists.

3. Being young is not being stupid: When our government does the right thing or takes such a decision as appointing credible people into very sensitive roles, it sends the right message- we may be young, but we know and can do what is right. We also tell our friends and colleagues that we value and respect them, that is why we send them our best. They may also reciprocate our kind gesture.

4. Whether we fought in the bush or spent the period of war studying, the country needs all of us. For example, in terms of academic achievements, international recognition and career, Amb Deng has no rival in government now. But notwithstanding this, he is today the servant of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the President. Neither our collection of certificates nor our fighting skills in the bush should give any of us an aura of superiority, make us look down upon or hate each other. We all complement, reinforce and need each other to move our country forward.

Congrats to the people who worked behind the scene to secure this appointment, to the President, the government and people of South Sudan.

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