

South Sudan and the logic of extraction

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By Anne Bartlett

September 19, 2012 - Over recent years a recurrent theme on the lips of politicians and population alike in South Sudan, is the issue of corruption. Corruption, we are told, is like a cancer that is eating the society from the inside and the problem that must be rooted out if South Sudan is to move forward. Letters from President Salva Kiir and others encourage the dishonest individuals hand back the alleged \$4 billion that has been stolen. Once this happens, we are assured that South Sudan can secure a brighter future – one that is not tarnished by poverty or stunted opportunities for its population.

On a recent trip to Juba, I was thinking about such issues while sitting in one of those “international hotels” that charge international prices. Feeling rather like a fish out of water in such a place, I sat in the courtyard and looked around at the clientele frequenting the hotel. It didn’t take a genius to realize that there were basically three groups of people who spent their time there. The first was the international crowd: aid workers, foreign officials and consultants who were in South Sudan for business and needed a place to stay which resembled the kind of accommodation one could find elsewhere in the world. The second group was there to meet with the first group. This group consisted of politicians and others interested in either conducting business, or figuring out how to handle some of the rebuilding issues facing the country. The third group was there to meet with the second group. These people were basically foreign or home grown opportunists, hangers on and petty criminals looking to see what kinds of benefits they could extract if they spent enough time around people who could afford to pay for these kinds of hotels. The only other people that one could find in these international places were foreign staff and, for the most part, foreign owners. South Sudanese people were notably absent, except the few young people who were waiting the tables because they were unable to finish their education at Juba University and other educational institutions.

Surveying this scene filled me with sadness. After 20 years of civil war and struggle on the part of the people of South Sudan, it seemed clear that the foundations of the economy were being built on a logic of extraction which implicated foreign governments, NGOs, the GoSS and private corporate interests in spending vast sums of money on overpriced basic services. It also seemed clear that this logic of extraction is far more dangerous than corruption alone, because it links money for hotels (often obtained by dubious means), to a systematic money making machine that is able to remove vast sums of money from the economy not just once, but every single day. The fact that one can struggle to find a room in a city like Juba where room rates can cost upwards of \$150-\$200 per night, illustrates the sheer amount of money that is being extracted from what should be spent on much needed development and infrastructure projects. It is not overstating things at all to say that every penny extracted in this way, is a penny stolen from South Sudan’s future.

Thinking about this issue I also found myself wondering why these “international” places have become so attractive. In simplistic terms one might reply by saying that that there is lighting, security, cold beer, and air-conditioning – and all of this is true. But there is a bigger question about what “international” means to local people. Does “international” signify something that South Sudanese people feel they don’t have? Is “international” merely a code word for power, money or security that is supposed to come from somewhere else? Is the “international community” a thing that is supposed to come riding over the horizon to rescue local people?

These questions become even more important when one watches the endless rounds of movement leaders and politicians parading through Washington DC looking for photo opportunities with “international” leaders. This desire to be outside of South Sudan is almost like a disease, where those in power don’t believe in themselves unless they can show that khawagas do. It is almost as if the actual landscape of politics in the USA and elsewhere doesn’t really matter, as long as there is the smiling photo with a politician – any politician – who is famous. Whether the person one is photographed with is in power, is likely to get into power, or even cares what the South Sudanese are suffering seems to be of little consequence. Instead it is all about the air travel, the photograph that proves one has reached the West and the suggestion that one is now “in” with the international crowd. The big question here is what this all means. Is this the New Sudan that Dr. John Garang envisaged where elite and foreign interests extract huge sums from the economy without helping the people and where politics has been outsourced to those who want a photo opportunity on the White House lawn?

Rather than looking outwards for solutions to crisis - for loans, for advice and for those who can rebuild South Sudan in an “international” image, maybe the time has come to look inwards. South Sudan most certainly does not need the Washington Consensus from the IMF and World Bank; neither does it need loan conditionalities and a long slow slide into debt at the hands of the Chinese. Maybe the African people who have always been innovative in solving their own problems, can develop South Sudan in their own image, if only given the chance. If oil revenues are used sensibly to kickstart the agricultural base of the country rather than being wasted on expensive hotels, there is the potential to feed not only South Sudan but also much of the region. Further, rather than talking about South Sudan’s economic integration into East Africa or the world economy, it would be more to the point to make sure that local kids have the education they need so that they have the skillset to

compete for the nation in the future. This future is possible without barrels of cash too. A lot can be achieved with creativity, quiet thought and belief in what the power of “local” rather than “international” can do.

South Sudan is now at a critical juncture. The time has come to stop taking from the country and start putting back. There is no need to continue with the useless, self-serving behavior of Khartoum’s political elite that has so long dominated the landscape of Sudanese politics. Instead there is a different route to political, economic and social sustainability: one that builds, rather than extracts.

In the final analysis, South Sudan can believe in itself, or outsource that belief to others. For myself, for the people, and for the future of this young country, I sincerely hope that it is the former, rather than the latter.

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