

Pragmatism should not be synonymous with opportunism

Friday 2 November 2012

By Lam Akol

The Son of my Brother, Kuir E Garang,

November 1, 2012 - Since you addressed me in your open letter as "uncle", allow me to take the liberty of calling you the "son of my brother". This is one of our good African traditions in contrast to 'Afronomy' you mentioned in your letter. That is one necessary point to explain. The other is that it is not in my habit to respond to all what is written about me in the press, and there are many nasty such writings, but your presentation is different. Despite my disagreement with most of what you wrote about, as it will become clear in the following lines, your arguments are presented intellectually without being unduly abusive. This is why I believe engaging you in an honest debate would be useful both to you as a motivated young man, and to all and sundry who are interested in finding out the truth. It is not a waste of time to respond as many will hasten to advise me. Our nation will not move forward by building walls between us but rather by opening bridges for communication between and among us. I assume that was your intention, otherwise, you would not have taken the trouble to put pen to paper.

I will overlook your description of me to be 'whimsical' as the term is obviously an oxymoron in this case, for everything you said about me in the letter is antithetical to that epithet.

The Son of my Brother,

From the outset, I would like to point out that I will here only respond to those parts of your letter addressed to me personally or to both of us together. I believe Dr Riek Machar is capable of speaking for himself despite the aspersions that come out from time to time in your letter and elsewhere that he was just 'used' in the Nasir Move in 1991.

Let me begin with your reference to what you call the "unfortunate, yet incoherent split of SPLA/M in 1991". This characterization contradicts your assertion that you were 'paraphrasing' the reasons behind the split which come out as a coherent stuff. In fact, you go further to say this: "I have to confess, for those who have read the policy paper of the two of you in 1991; the paper was appealing on face value. If all the things narrated in the policy position were implemented in the manner they were documented, South Sudan could be a different place now; a peaceful, prosperous place". Therefore, the split might have been 'unfortunate' for some of its unforeseen consequences, but was never 'incoherent' by your own admission. This is a central point to your argument and indeed to the current discourse.

In the same vein, in addressing Dr Riek Machar, you had this to say: "So Dr Riek Machar, your vision for South Sudan was thwarted by your disagreement with Dr Akol, your eventual split and your consequential tribalization of the national agenda". This is an unequivocal admission that Dr Riek had a vision for South Sudan which got thwarted because of the reasons you gave. One, then, wonders where that accolade has gone when you said on addressing Dr Riek Machar again that "it appears to me that 1991 was orchestrated by Dr Lam Akol in its entirety and that you had nothing absolutely to do with the split. You were just used by Dr Lam as a question of numbers advantage". Are you not unwittingly risking sliding into the same pit of those who have been unscrupulously parroting such untruth without weighing their words? Dr Riek Machar is an intellectual on his own right and a capable SPLA/M Commander, and the people who say such things either do not know what they are talking about or are trying to be too clever to pass the buck to others. I am disinclined to describe you as such.

On being "the brain behind the 1991", this is an honour I do not claim alone. There were many brains behind the Nasir Move far beyond the three SPLM/A Political-Military High Command members who made the announcement on the 28th of August 1991 in Nasir. If some people, for one reason or the other, are today afraid to admit so, this does not change the historical fact. I played my role and others did theirs. It is inconceivable that such a momentous event could be a work of one brain!

The Son of my Brother,

On my assignment as Sudan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, you seem to be unaware of several obvious facts. You say: "you accepted the ministerial post knowing that you had to present the Sudanese position to the world; and that position was not for the interest of South Sudanese people." This is the balderdash we hear on the streets. In the first place, why should you assume that the Sudanese position was not for the interest of South Sudanese people? Be informed that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) stipulates that the SPLM and the National Congress were in partnership to implement the agreement. They were not enemies as some who entertained hidden agendas misled a good number of South Sudanese to believe. We were in a coalition government known as the Government of National Unity (GONU) that came about as a result of the CPA and whose main function it was to implement it. The SPLM was part and parcel of GONU, and not outside it, again, as some of you were made to believe. I presume you know how coalition governments work. If so, are you saying that the CPA was "not to the interest of South Sudanese people"? The policies of that Government were formulated by the Council of Ministers with

eight SPLM ministers and a Presidency where the First Vice President from South Sudan has a right of veto; the most powerful vice president in the world. If all these people cannot guarantee the interest of South Sudanese people, including in the area of foreign affairs, then perhaps it was not worth signing the CPA. All the questions that followed in your letter are unfortunate redundancies because they were based on a wrong premise, and so is the conclusion that "It all comes down to one thing: you did it for your own political agenda; to present your face to the world. This makes me wonder if you used Dr Riek in 1991 in the same vain (sic): at the expense of the people." For your information, my face was well known to the world already as one of the leaders of the 1985 popular Intifadha (Uprising) that overthrew Nimeiri's dictatorship, and afterwards as the SPLM/A's Chief Peace Negotiator since 1988, the SPLM/A's negotiator and focal point of the UN-sponsored and well publicized Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), the SPLM/A Director of Coordination and External Relations 1988-1990, the Secretary for External Affairs and Peace 1991-1994 and as Chairman of SPLM-United 1994-2003. All these assignments entailed world exposure. In all humility, I had a high international profile already and didn't need to use Dr Machar or any other person or position to enhance it. On the contrary, it was all these assignments that benefited from my high profile including the ministry of foreign affairs. I hope you are not one of the victims of the intense propaganda that was waged against me then with the only objective to get me out of the ministerial post. I will touch on some aspects of this campaign shortly.

The Son of my Brother,

Your biggest flop came when you unfortunately averred that "when you were removed from the ministry of foreign affairs, you went ahead and formed a party in a country that still has a long way to go to embrace liberal democracy. Why did you not take one ministry and make it exemplary for the rest of the country? You could have asked Kiir to give you one ministry, reform it, and make it immutable to the rest." First, you seem to suggest that you do not believe that the time is ripe for liberal democracy. I will return to this point later on. Second, I did not form a political party as soon as I was removed from the ministry of foreign affairs as you appear to suggest. Let me jog your memory. I was removed from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 2007 whereas my party was formed two years later in 2009. In between, I continued to be a loyal member of the SPLM. However, a number of events took place that drove me out of the party. There has always been a group in the SPLM who did not want me in the SPLM leadership since the reunification in October 2003 of the SPLM/A with the SPLM-United, which I led since I was dismissed by Riek Machar in February 1994. The group tried to influence Dr John Garang to place me in the Leadership Council as a junior to them which failed because I rejected it. It is the same group that was unhappy because I was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs and they have been spreading falsehood against me since then including the seeming incompatibility of the interest of South Sudan with that of Sudan that you delved in. The story is long. Suffice it to mention that it is the same group which engineered the Ministerial Strike in October 2007; the first in the world. We know how coalition governments are dissolved, but, anyway, this is beside our point now. The only reason for the strike was to remove Dr Lam Akol from the Cabinet. After the walkout, Salva Kiir reshuffled the SPLM component of the Government and moved me to the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs. The new lineup was announced by the President and a date for taking the oath of office was fixed and arrangements were in place in the Republican Palace for the occasion. At the last minute the group persuaded Salva Kiir to postpone the occasion and insisted to continue the strike. It was only when my name was dropped from the lineup that the SPLM went back to the Cabinet. I continued as a member of the Political Bureau of the SPLM and a member of National Parliament representing SPLM. Again obstacles were put on my way. For instance, in April, my car was shot at near Malakal by unknown assailants resulting in the killing of my bodyguard and the driver. In the same month, I was denied getting into Kodok town by an SPLM Commissioner using the SPLA. After that I was refused to address the public in Kaka and Wadakona by the SPLM Commissioner (who was previously an SAF intelligence Sergeant when I was commander of the area) and the SPLA commander. I raised complaints to Salva Kiir on these incidences to no avail. I still keep copies of these letters of complaint. Can you imagine junior Party members preventing a member of the Political Bureau from interacting with the public without orders from above?

Then came the SPLM convention in 2008, and my name was left out of the members Salva Kiir appointed to the Political Bureau. This was as a result of pressure from the same group. Things did not stop at that. There followed a sustained campaign of character assassination against me in the daily newspapers and even on South Sudan TV. I again raised the matter to Salva Kiir as the Chairman of the SPLM, again in vain. I am not complaining, only pointing out facts that you rightfully requested in your open letter. Thus, it is abundantly clear that I had no choice but to leave with my dignity intact, unless you want me to be like Dr Riek Machar who you are now complaining against as an opportunist. Wasn't the war about our dignity? If we were all these years complaining about the Arabs treating us as 'second class' citizens why would one accept it in a party that is presumably one's choice? Dr John Garang used to lecture to SPLA soldiers that 'oppression has no particular colour'; oppressors could be white, red, black or even your own brother. I and others with me refused to accept humiliation. Such was the birth of SPLM-DC in June 2009. If our country has still "a long way to go to embrace liberal democracy", it has to start somewhere, and this must be done by some people who dedicate themselves to the cause of multi-party democracy regardless of the thorny road to be traversed. Even in the West, democracy came at a huge human cost. Shortcuts in politics could sometimes be more damaging.

By now you should be in a position to answer your own question whether, even if I were to stoop down to do that, I could ask Salva Kiir to pick me a ministry that I can make "exemplary for the rest of the country". That is not only beyond idealism; it is wishful thinking to believe that President Salva, who succumbed to pressures to exclude me from a cabinet position in 2007 government reshuffle, would hand me a ministry to use as a prototype.

As to my absence during the flag-raising ceremony on 9th July 2011, I have said and written a lot about it. It cannot be isolated from the reason why I was not in Juba before then. Your rhetorical question that “who the hell is Kiir”? is what you did not think through more realistically. For starters, he is the President of the Republic and the Commander-in-Chief of the SPLA, among his other titles. In that capacity he has the control of the institutions that monopolize the instruments of violence. Did you not hear that the Leader of the official Opposition was beaten by the security and lost his teeth on the 7th of July 2011 for no reason other than celebrating the independence of South Sudan? So I had to talk to Salva Kiir in Nairobi, not the other way round, to give me assurances on my security in Juba. I am thankful that he did. That is what took me to Juba and spent two months there. Nevertheless, the group had the upper hand and things relapsed, but this is a matter that does not concern us here.

The Son of my Brother,

Sincerely, you confuse me in what I see as conflicting pieces of advice you are giving me. In one breath you criticize Dr Machar, and rightly so, for being unable to do something in his position, but at the same time you advise me to join the “deformed” SPLM and its government. If I accept such an advice, this would be where really the SPLM will be right to see me “as a selfish political opportunist after his own political agenda” as you put it. Without changing the structure of an institution, individuals, however gifted they may be, cannot do much. The pragmatism you are calling for, is for me synonymous with opportunism. Far from your assertion that my “brain is being wasted on theoretical propositions just like some of” you, I happen to believe in the infinite capacity of our people to understand their own situation and effect change. You are unfortunately absolutely wrong to think that our people cannot or have not been sensitized enough to size up the misrule meted on them by the SPLM. You yourself admit that “the self-righteousness within SPLM is suffocating and disastrous for the country.” How many South Sudanese would have reached this conclusion three years ago or even a year ago? And if they did, how many will say so publicly? A few days ago there was a popular demonstration in Juba against the giving away to Sudan of ‘Mile 14 Area’. Was that not due to awareness? Could it have come without the ‘other point of view’?

Education is a slow process but because it is worth pursuing we never tire of doing so. And it obviously needs brains too! Do not forget that it takes 16 years for a normal student to earn a University degree! Achievement can only happen under a conducive environment. Joining a ‘deformed’ and ‘suffocating’ SPLM, as you correctly described the unruly ruling party or its corrupt government would be the height of opportunism. This is why it is crucially imperative to acknowledge that the brains that strive to bring about change are not being wasted. Remember, the best practice is founded on well grounded theory(ies).

Stay well, the son of my brother, and keep the books coming. Some people will definitely read them.

Thank you.

Uncle Dr Lam Akol.

The author is the leader of the opposition SPLM-Democratic Change