

Unitary system of government is old fashioned

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January 30, 2013 - In The Citizen newspaper of January 20, 2013 - Vol. 7. Issue No. 351 page 7, a fellow columnist and a prolific writer, William Sunday D Tor, argued eloquently for the adoption of a unitary system of government in South Sudan in the year 2013 as opposed to a decentralized or federal system. Some of the disadvantages of a federal system mentioned include tribal and regional tendencies citing as an example landownership where citizens from other states are denied the right to own land. This is arguable because there are legal ways of acquiring a piece of land.

For the acquisition of a piece of land one has to submit an application to the authorities concerned and follow it up persistently like anybody else. William Sunday D Tor also alleges that the federal system has created economic and development problems to South Sudan. In his view a unitary system will be a solution or the solution. He calls for the current decentralized system of government to be abolished. What can only be said here is that William Sunday D Tor is entitled to his view like anybody else.

Unitary system

A unitary system of government may be defined as a centralized system where decisions that are likely to affect the peripheries are taken. It is the centre that has the choice to implement whatever policies may be enacted. A typical example was the Arabisation and Islamisation policy adopted for the whole old Sudan. The then nine provinces of the old Sudan had very little input to the policy. The three southern provinces were in particular hard hit because on their own they would not have adopted such a policy. The only choice was to rebel.

The rebellion brought a decentralized system of government to the old Sudan. The three southern provinces were granted self-government as one southern region. This was in accordance with the principle of the revolutionary government of the day for the Sudanese people to participate actively in the decentralized system of government of their own country.

The southern region was decentralized into three regions corresponding to the former three southern provinces. Many who opposed the decentralization considered it as the division of the southern region into weakling regions which could not stand up to the might of the North. However, when the supposedly three weakling regions were further divided into ten states no uproar was observed as when the southern region was decentralized into three regions.

Those who had considered the southern region as divided into three weaklings missed something very important. The division was a blessing in disguise. The supposedly three weakling regions like the three southern provinces before jointly struggled as representing people of one destiny. The struggle ultimately led to the attainment of independence.

For the system of government in South Sudan various suggestions can be made. There is already one suggestion that a unitary or a centralized system should be adopted. Other suggestions could also be made. For example, a decentralized or a federal system could be suggested. First let a unitary system be considered.

A unitary system is for those who consider an absolute grip on power is appropriate in the interest of nation building. Diversities may not be recognized as when Arabisation and Islamisation were imposed on the three southern provinces. In a unitary system there will always be one ethnic group or a region dominating in the affairs of the nation.

In the old Sudan the northern region in contrast to eastern, central, southern and western region was always dominating in the affairs of the country. In the defunct southern region one ethnic group out of over 60 ethnic groups was dominating. The high executive council was composed of 50 per cent of people from the one ethnic group. How a unitary system could be seen as promoting unity when a region or an ethnic group would be dominating is an open question. The unitary system in the old Sudan was a failure and there is no guarantee that it will not be a failure in South Sudan.

After decades of experiment the unitary or centralized system was a failure in the former Soviet Union. Probably aware of the failure of a unitary system in addressing diversities, the transitional constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, 2011, Article 47 stipulates clearly that South Sudan shall have a decentralized system of government. However, in practice the system seems to be more of a unitary than decentralized system which to some extent fulfills the hope for a unitary system of government in South Sudan in the year 2013. The states are not empowered to collect taxes as expected in a decentralized system for development. Collection of taxes has been centralized which is causing some states, for example Central Equatoria, to suffer acutely from lack of revenue.

Decentralized system

Article 47(a, b) confirms a decentralized system of government in South Sudan. It can be seen that the main objective of a

decentralized system is to bring the government and services closer to the people. It is difficult to see how a decentralized system disunites people when the focus is to bring services for a high standard of living. What really disunites people is high level of corruption and deliberate inequitable sharing of power and wealth as a result of tribalism contrary to nationalism.

Theories of top-down and bottom-up approaches may be helpful. A top-down approach may represent a centralized system where unquestionable compliance is expected. In contrast a bottom-up approach offers a wider participation of people in managing their own affairs and this may be likened to a decentralized system.

As a development practitioner I am baffled when people think of a decentralized system as divisive which means people are divided. This is flawed thinking. A decentralized system of government is one that divides the powers of government between the national government and state, and local government. From this definition there is nowhere shown that a decentralized system divides the people. It should be understood that a decentralized system only divides powers of government but not the people.

Under a decentralized system, each level of government has sovereignty in some areas and shares powers in other areas. Both the national and state governments should have the power to tax but only the national government can declare war. A decentralized system of government is an appropriate compromise in nation building and development. It is only the poor implementation of a decentralized system that may be divisive.

There is worldwide support for a decentralized system because the decentralized system enables a nation to have the best of both worlds, those of shared rule and self-rule. The decentralization of power gives a nation the flexibility to accommodate economic and cultural diversities. A decentralized system is more democratic than a unitary system because there are more levels of government for public opinion to affect. By dividing sovereignty, the decentralized system of powers reduces the risk of authoritarianism as may happen in a unitary system.

People must understand that a decentralized system is central for development. Without appropriate governance structures at the local level it will not be possible to generate, for example, sustainable rural development for a high standard of living. Through commitment decentralization will provide more effective and efficient government as well as an improvement in the quality of the services delivered.

In a decentralized system the local authorities know the needs and options, and they are therefore in a better position to establish the right priorities than the national government far away. Devolution of powers, responsibilities and resources to the local government in a decentralized system will promote better service delivery. Devolution of powers will likely deepen democracy and enhance the legitimacy of political system in promoting peace and prosperity in a diverse country like South Sudan.

Unitary system old fashion

A unitary system has become old fashion. Ethiopia, our next door neighbour to the east, had used a unitary system throughout most of its history when it was ruled by kings or emperors but in modern times opted for a decentralized system. The constitution of Ethiopia establishes a federal and democratic state structure whereby the Ethiopian State is called the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Has the decentralized system weakened Ethiopia? It is an open question.

The United Kingdom which was the mother of unitary system throughout the ages has now devolved powers from the Parliament of the United Kingdom to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly and to their associated executive bodies such as the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. The decentralization of power by all means has not weakened the United Kingdom.

From the above two scenarios it can be seen that indeed a unitary system is old fashion.

Conclusion

Adopting a unitary system of government for South Sudan will be a disaster because the real effect will be disunity. South Sudan is large and diverse that a unitary system is unlikely to cope with mounting challenges. The perceived high economic cost of a decentralized system is incorrect. The real problem is corruption which causes billions to be squandered. The squandered billions could have addressed the worries about the assumed high economic cost of a decentralized system.

The hope for a unitary system of government in South Sudan in the year 2013 will only remain a hope for the foreseeable future because people have moved on. Dr John Garang de Mabior did not abolish the decentralized system of South Sudan into ten states. Instead he went on to create counties, payams and bomas in line with a decentralized system of government for effective and efficient service delivery to the people.

In conclusion, a decentralized system should be understood as division of power but not the division of people so that they are disunited. South Sudanese had struggled together to achieve independence as people of one destiny although they were from different provinces, regions, states and ethnic groups. How on earth is decentralization going to disunite them when the struggle is not yet over? The struggle continues for a peaceful and prosperous South Sudan where no one is seen above the law. This is one major way of guaranteeing unity.