

# The "curse" of Liberation

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By Luka Biong Deng

February 15, 2013 - On March 18, the SPLM will hold an extraordinary convention to pass the basic documents required for it to be registered as a political party, such as the manifesto, constitution, code of conduct, internal and financial regulations. This meeting is expected to be preceded by the meeting of the Political Bureau on February 14 and the National Liberation Council on March 11.

These meetings will also set the agenda of how the SPLM will democratically govern and provide leadership. Another convention, to be held in May, will be a litmus test of how the SPLM will put into practice its basic documents, elect its new leadership and prepare an election agenda that will cherish democratic governance.

In early October 2012, I attended a high-level workshop in Italy, hosted by the Brenthurst Foundation and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, under the theme "From Liberation Movement to Government: past legacies and the challenge of transition in Africa". More than nine case studies of countries that are governed by liberation movements were discussed in this workshop. They included South Africa, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Uganda, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania and Ethiopia. I was asked to make a contribution on how to implement the lessons of transition from liberation to government in Africa's newest state.

The liberation struggle, whether armed or non-violent, has proven to be one of the effective ways of bringing political change in the world. Africa in particular provides many inspiring cases of liberation movements that fought prolonged and often painful struggles, with great heroism and often at great cost, in order to achieve the liberation of their people from oppressive regimes.

In some rare cases, this resulted in the establishment of a new state, as in the case of South Sudan. But in most cases, it resulted in reforming the existing state. It is always anticipated that such change will provide the basis for a viable government. The trend in Africa seems to suggest otherwise as limited number of liberation movements have succeeded to transform themselves into a viable national government.

Prof. Christopher Clapham of Cambridge University started the workshop with a paper titled: 'The Curse of Liberation'. He highlighted the virtues of liberation movements as well as their challenges in governing. He identified a common pattern that seems to be the same across various liberation movements. Prof Clapham smartly and analytically showed that the very virtues of liberation movements pose real challenges for providing a viable government.

One of the virtues of victorious liberation movement is that they inherit from the struggle a powerful sense of legitimacy. In fact these liberators have risked their lives for the cause, and have come to power with a living memory of the selfless sacrifices of their comrades who have died. With such sacrifices and legitimacy, they have the right to run the new government.

Besides this sense of legitimacy, the liberators bring into government ideals and values such as a common purpose, commitment and discipline that shaped their liberation struggle. Also the success of most liberation movements is that they are people-centred and grassroots-based so as to ensure the support from ordinary people on whose behalf they were fighting.

Despite these noble virtues, Prof Clapham argued that all liberation movements have experienced enormous difficulties in making the transition from the struggle to government. These problems according to Prof. Clapham are structural, rooted in the experience of struggle and common to every liberation movement. On top is the mindset of the liberators as they assume a sense not only of the rightness of their cause but of their entitlement to the power that follows.

Prof Clapham argued that it is very hard for liberators to recognise that anyone else could have any equivalent right to rule as their selfless sacrifices in the struggle confer a virtually permanent and exclusive claim on state power. When liberation movements are in control of state power, Prof. Clapham observed that there is a temptation to use that power to repress dissent, while reliance on popular support can frighteningly swift to reliance on organised state power.

Another problem faced by liberation movements is the fact that waging a liberation struggle is completely different from running a government. While fighting a war is an enterprise with a single and clear goal to achieve victory that calls for unity, commitment, discipline and top-down structure of command and control, running a government is an exercise with multiple and competing goals that require consensus-building in setting agendas and identification of priorities. Subsequently, the rigidity that is dictated by the liberation struggle may not be appropriate in running a government that requires a high level

of flexibility.

Other challenges faced by liberation movements include the difference within its ranks between pragmatists, power seekers and ideologists, as well as rivalries between those “in”, who have gained important positions, and those “out” who were left out of the new government. Interestingly, Prof. Clapham observed one universal pattern where the top leadership is strengthened with a new group of individuals, personally associated with the leader but without the same credentials from the struggle and at the expense of other leading figures in the movement. Because of these problems faced by the liberation movements in government, some voices started calling for the second liberation from liberators after the first liberation from colonial and racist governments.

On the basis of this account, I used some indicators to assess the implications for the SPLM in governing South Sudan. The statistics of the population living below the poverty line and income disparity indicate that most liberation movements have not been successful in fighting poverty and inequality. Also using the corruption perception index, most liberation movements have not been able to combat corruption. Based on civil liberties and political rights index, most liberation movements have not been successful in creating a free political environment.

The long list of challenges in transforming a liberation movement into a government is not intended to convey a sense of hopelessness. On the contrary, it provides a solid basis for addressing them. This would require, as mentioned by Greg and Herbst in their book titled “Africa’s Third Liberation”, a new liberation from political economies characterized by graft, crony capitalism, rent-seeking, elitism and social inequality.

Although it is too early to judge the performance of the SPLM in the transition from liberation struggle to government, some early indicators strongly suggest that the SPLM is at the early stage of being affected by the “curse” of liberation. Various reports and internal evaluations indicate that the SPLM is depleting its political capital and losing its grass root support.

After the series of meetings, the SPLM is expected to become more united, firmer in championing democratic transformation and capable of winning the Third Liberation. They should do so with a clear agenda of making the people of South Sudan feel freer, safer, more secure and more able to feed themselves, educate their children, access clean water, health services and jobs.

Considering the history of the SPLM, the selfless sacrifices of its martyrs and the country’s enormous resources, the SPLM cannot let down the people of South Sudan. SPLM has no other option but to secure for them a better and more prosperous future.

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