

# Unity of South Sudan not a gift in golden plate

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February 26, 2013 - The unity of South Sudan is not something that is like a gift in a golden plate. It has to be diligently earned. Similarly the beauty of a woman alone may not sustain the love of the opposite sex but the woman's cooperative responses may.

Although South Sudanese had fought in wars of liberation as people of one destiny this did not mean automatic sustainable unity among them. South Sudanese fought as people drawn from the different tribes and regions with unique cultures and tastes. The one thing they shared was the strong aspiration for freedom from gross marginalization. After achieving freedom the second project would have been how to achieve sustainable unity among people as diverse as South Sudanese.

For sustainable unity diversities must first be recognized. This will be one first step in search of better ways in promoting sustainable unity. Nevertheless, the long struggle of South Sudanese as people of one destiny should have made it easier to compromise on how best to sustain national unity of people who had fought as one but were diverse.

## Diversities in South Sudan

It is easy to gloss over diversities in South Sudan with the enthusiastic belief that the big picture is the unity of South Sudan and anything else is secondary. This is not only simplistic but it is pushing problems under the carpet with unknown consequences. A solid foundation of unity must first be laid so that the next focus is on socio-economic development for a high quality of life of the people. There is no shortcut. The solid foundation of unity must be based on the reality of diversities of the country.

South Sudan is a country of over sixty tribes with diverse cultures and many differences. It is also of three main regions that were administered separately in British colonial times and during Arab neocolonialism. However, the people of South Sudan have a lot in common. They share one destiny as people who had been grossly marginalized and exploited by what was then Northern Sudan. The people are of African stock and share common African traditional beliefs. They also share main economic activities such as farming and cattle keeping. This suggests two predominant cultures, sedentary farming and pastoralism.

Obviously it can be concluded that South Sudan is a diverse country with many tribes, different regions and contrasting cultures. A system of governance that sustains the unity of a country as diverse as South Sudan should therefore be carefully considered in promoting a peaceful co-existence in the national interest. A rush to adopt a system of governance, for example, to favour group interest as opposed to national interest will be problematic.

## Unitary versus federal system

South Sudan is doing some soul searching as to what system of governance is suitable to sustain national unity. People are free to express their views. One view is that a unitary system guarantees national unity while a federal one is seen as a sure way to disunite South Sudan. Those in favour of a unitary system seem to protect group interest. The danger here is that the group interest is being mistaken for national interest. However, a federal system that is seen as appropriate in serving diversities in the national interest is being misunderstood because of suspicion and lack of trust. This suggests people need to have confidence. People therefore need to be educated so that they know that there is no hidden agenda in advocating for a federal system.

Those who advocate a unitary system should similarly educate people who are not yet convinced of the merit of a unitary system in a diverse country such as South Sudan. However, the experience of a mixture of unitary system currently applied in South Sudan is very negative. States do not have the necessary powers they should have to render badly needed services and maintaining the rule of law is a nightmare. State tax powers are usurped and the police is so centralized with the paradox that insecurity is rampant because criminals seem to have become superior. Regional marginalization is also experienced.

In a federal system powers are decentralized to the extent that the states or regions can become self-reliant. In the federal system states are within their own decision-making powers to render the appropriate services without having to wait for the centre to decide. The federal system cannot be seen to favour only one state. All the states will tremendously benefit hence the people. The fact that it is the people of Equatoria advocating for a federal system does not mean Equatoria will be the only beneficiary. At any rate Equatoria is always the pioneer and what is good for Equatoria may equally be good nationwide.

The exaggerated fear of a federal system is based on falsehood. I have already explained in my article, Constitutionality of Convening Equatoria Conference 2013, the likely reason why people from the other regions oppose a federal system. The article was published by the Citizen Newspaper of February 25, 2013 - Vol 7. Issue No. 387. The opposition to a federal

system is because of the perceived adverse effect on group interest. It is the inability to share.

#### Unity not a gift

Unity is not a God-given gift. It is something that people earnestly have to work for. Unity is not sustained by a one off act. It is sustained by a series of actions. Starting on the premises that South Sudan is a diverse country, it is then not difficult to conceptualise the type of actions needed to sustain national unity. The problem may be that people are not seriously conscious of diversities or deliberately ignore them. This may explain how one tribe may dominate in all aspects of affairs of the nation to the dissatisfaction of others. This naturally creates the problem of marginalization of others. In such a scenario how possible is it to sustain national unity? Numerous examples of marginalisation of others can be cited when people are not seriously conscious of diversities in nation building.

When injustices are perpetuated with impunity by people who assume they have relatives in power how will there be sustainable national unity? A good example of unity not a gift is illustrated by the resolutions of Equatoria Conference 2013 although the resolutions are diplomatically watered down but not as views were expressed live in the Conference. However, the resolutions show something somewhere was not right as they hint of institutionalized marginalization of the people of Equatoria. This should not have happened in a federal system but only in a unitary system where decisions are taken at the centre without the active participation of stakeholders.

It can be seen that a unitary system mostly serves group interest and to marginalize others on the group's whims. It is difficult to see how a unitary system heavily laden with narrow group interest can sustain national unity in a diverse country such as South Sudan. People may need to think carefully about the most appropriate system of governance that is respectful of diversities to avoid the feared disintegration of South Sudan.

#### Forging national unity

Much has been said about South Sudan as a diverse country. However, what has not been heard of much is how to forge national cohesion and unity. People are loud about unity but are short on how to attain it. Probably behind closed doors people may be very busy dreaming dreams of how by all means not to lose their grip on power whether in the national interest or not. Group interest is seen as of paramount importance. In such a situation how can people forge national unity?

One way of forging national unity is a call for sacrifices as during the liberation wars. People had sacrificed with their lives. It is then difficult to see how people cannot sacrifice for national unity. Sacrificing for national unity is to rise above group interest to the level of national interest. The problem, however, is that people may not see the difference.

In the context of South Sudan group interest is equivalent to tribal interest. In contrast national interest can be taken as the aggregate interest of the various tribes and different regions. The implication is that the various tribes and the different regions must have power to manage their own affairs in their best interest and this can only happen in a federal system but not in a unitary system that serves the interest of a dominant group. By the way when the various tribes and the different regions manage their own affairs this will not create disunity when they are busy concentrating on their welfare instead of being dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction may be the one that causes disunity.

A federal system will never create disunity because people will be happy managing their own affairs within the national context. It will sustain national unity in contrast to a unitary system that serves narrow tribal interest and the perception that others are marginalized. The clear disadvantage of a unitary system is highlighted by some of the resolutions of the Equatoria Conference 2013 hence the call for a federal system to address injustices.

Hopefully it is understood that unity of South Sudan is not a gift in a golden plate but something that must be diligently worked for. There are people in denial that South Sudan is diverse in tribes and regions hence the blindfolded call for a unitary system as though South Sudan is a homogenous society. The fact that people had fought liberation wars as people of one destiny does not nullify diversities.

The burning desire for freedom had strongly united people but after freedom has been attained is there anything that is so burning to hold people together. Arguably there is none when freedom has turned to disillusion even though some will argue that the enemy is not yet far away from our northern border. However, it is said Rome was not built in a day. People should therefore be patient and hopeful that things may turn for the better in the near future.

Unity is not a free gift but must be earned. The question is how? Well people need to shed their tribal coats and put on national ones. This means the adoption of a federal system that empowers and serves every corner and part of the Republic of South Sudan to be self-reliant in socio-economic development for a high standard of living. A unitary system may stifle local creativity. Town centers may be filthy because of centralization of powers that states have no tax powers to generate revenues for rejuvenation of towns.

In conclusion, as the literacy rate is very low in the context of South Sudan a unitary system will be debilitating to national unity because of its inherent characteristic of being centered on any emerging dominant group that may be full of illiterates who may know nothing except their self-interest at the expense of the various groups and regions that form the nation. It can

be said with confidence that a unitary system is a danger to the unity of a country full of diversities.