

Traitors, Sellouts and Political Loyalty in the New State of South Sudan

Written by Nicki Kindersley

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NICKI KINDERSLEY, JUN 27 2012

Everyone voted for South Sudan's secession last year. This is the popular narrative in the newly-independent South, which seceded from Sudan on 9 July last year. The official figure of a 98% vote for independence is a badge of honour for the new state. People have framed their voter cards – merely having a voter card is, apparently, proof of being a 'loyal' secessionist. The sometimes violent and mostly insidious intimidation and social pressure on people to vote for independence (or if not, to stay at home) was pre-dated by intense local wrangling over voter registration and suspicions of northern Sudanese infiltration.[1] There were many places with a 100%+ turnout rate for both registration and voting[2] – this was not necessarily done to win independence, as the poll returns were already reasonably assured, but was a form of competition. The 98% is now a founding myth of national loyalty and unity for the new state.

This idea of absolute national loyalty has continued, and if anything has become more entrenched: the vote (and turnout) is an initial demonstration of the insecurities and anxieties of the Juba-based and SPLM (Sudan People's Liberation Movement) led government and its supporters, both civilian and military, since its establishment in 2005. This has produced a string of problematic events characterised by many international agencies as human rights abuses, generally by an under-trained and over-forceful military and police. However, these incidents are also visibly part of a very authoritarian concern over political loyalty and dissent.

There is a long history of media harassment and restriction in the south by the SPLM and the army. This has continued in independence, but with an emphasis – in the excuses for arrests and intimidation – on how journalists and other citizens are being disloyal by challenging current affairs. Many journalists have been harassed, arrested, briefly 'disappeared' and assaulted for disagreeing with government policy or officials – including, most recently, for asking how the police service could be improved.[3]

This harassment – framed in terms of political loyalty – has been joined in recent years by the policing of respect and national character in a wider way. In the capital city Juba and elsewhere, some police – often new recruits – have arrested, threatened and sometimes assaulted women and some men for dressing apparently inappropriately, the implication being that Western and Eastern African 'values' are infecting the youth of the new, virtuous state.[4]

This emphasis on an apparent standard of South Sudanese morality and national respect has coalesced recently around Freedom Square in Juba, which contains the new monument and mausoleum for John Garang, the leader of the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army and national hero. The square has become a focus for harassment by security forces on dubious grounds of apparent disrespect to the monument or to the flag.[5] On 12 May 2012, a Kenyan schoolteacher was shot dead by police when passing the monument because her driver did not hear the whistle – declaring that the flag over the mausoleum was being lowered for the evening – and stop the car.[6]

This idea of a specific standard of loyalty is relatively powerful in South Sudanese society, even while these violent state actions have been condemned. Some Southerners, who are suspected of having voted for unity with the north, who have returned from abroad or from living in Khartoum, have been called sell-outs, traitors and *jellaba* – historically hated northern traders – by local residents. Criticism of the government is still often seen as disloyal, and

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opposition parties – plagued already by personality politics, regional and ethnic factionalism and financial difficulties – are frequently accused of being funded stooges of the northern Sudanese government. There is often little room for being a critical public citizen in the South.

This is not a new or a universal phenomenon by any means, but it is an emerging theme, particularly in the towns of the new South Sudan. The trend towards monitored, enforced public political loyalty has been hardened and broadened by independence and the renewed wars and conflicts inside the state and on its border with Sudan. Sudanese governments in Khartoum and the South have always been authoritarian and militarised, and various government and military elements have often attempted to impose particular models and standards on society and culture. The SPLM-led Southern government and its officials are often more preoccupied with 'constructing a good nation' through public display, rather than practical structures.[7] Loyalty to the South Sudan nation is both assumed and, increasingly, enforced.

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[1] <http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/4352/Do-Not-Register-Message-to-South-Sudanese-Diaspora.aspx>

[2] <http://www.therecord.com/news/world/article/476964-officials-concerned-as-south-sudan-referendum-turnout-exceeds-100-per-cent-in-some-areas>

[3] <http://www.sudantribune.com/Female-journalist-arrested-without,42636>

[4] <http://www.sudantribune.com/Lakes-police-harrass-women-and-men,37622>

[5] <http://allafrica.com/stories/201205170653.html>

[6] <http://www.the-star.co.ke/national/national/75859-kenya-teacher-in-south-sudan-shot-dead-by-police-in-juba>

[7] Lakes state advisor for Gender and Human Right Affairs, Adak Costa Mapuor, quoted in <http://www.sudantribune.com/Lakes-police-harrass-women-and-men,37622>