

South Sudan a Year On: Statehood in Perspective

Written by Hagar Taha

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/07/06/south-sudan-a-year-on-statehood-in-perspective/>

HAGAR TAHA, JUL 6 2012

July 9th will mark the first year-anniversary of the South Sudanese state coming into existence, after it seceded from Sudan following two bloody civil wars that weakened the economy and the social fabric of the two states, and years of negotiations and peacemaking. As global attention focuses on evaluating the nascent state's performance during its first year of statehood, it's important to be aware of the challenges it faced not only after independence but also before it achieved it; the thing that will be affecting its performance for years to come. Analysing South Sudan's performance during the last year could shed light on the complex changing nature of statehood and the often exaggerated expectations we associate with it in today's international affairs, not only as citizens and scholars but also as statesmen and diplomats.

South Sudan's Struggle for Sovereignty

Sudan fought two civil wars in the post-WWII era: the first lasted from 1955 to 1972 and the second began in 1983 and ended in 2005 with the signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SPLM/A) in Nairobi. Even though minorities have always existed on both sides, the South has historically been predominantly inhabited by Christians and animists who view themselves as sub-Saharan, while the North has been populated mostly by Muslims who consider themselves Arabs. These social fault lines gave rise to tensions even before Sudan declared its independence in 1956.

A united resistance movement against the Arabized North first formed in the South as early as 1955. Although initially restricted mostly to rural areas, over time the movement developed into the armed secessionist movement, Anyanya, whose fighters were largely drawn from the Southern Sudanese student population. In 1971, the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SPLM) was formed from guerrilla bands under former army lieutenant Joseph Lagu; and in 1983, after the GoS abandoned the Addis Ababa Agreement – which granted the Southerners a single administrative region with various defined powers- the Sudan People's Liberation Army was established with Joseph Oduho as its chairman and Colonel John Garang as a commander (and later on its leader). During the civil war with the North, the South lost about five hundred thousand people while the fighting left additional hundreds of thousands of others displaced both internally and externally. The second civil war was even bloodier leading to the death of almost two million Southerners and displacing an additional four million people. And though the CPA ended the bloodshed and scheduled a referendum for self determination in January 2011, which indeed led to the eventual separation between the North and the South, this long struggle has caused the South not only great human loss but the immense destruction of its infrastructure – which was already basically non-existent to begin with in various parts of the country due to systematic marginalization by the North. Thus despite the celebrations and hopes independence created in the South, at its inception the country faced myriad problems- including poverty, displacement, destruction and underdevelopment- from its long, bloody struggle with the North.[i]

Post Independence Challenges to the New State

South Sudan has faced several internal and external challenges during its first year of independence that need to be taken into account when evaluating the state's performance.[ii] The government in Khartoum has accused the South of supporting rebels, manipulating its borders particularly with regards to the oil-rich Abyie region, and waged an offensive against its army in Hijlij, which raised concerns that the two Sudans might be dragged into yet another war.

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Furthermore, the continued stalled negotiations over the Southern oil pipelines passing through North Sudan, and the North's accusations that the South was stealing its oil, has shut down the oil production that is vital to the Southern economy. Indeed, the South Sudanese government is estimated to rely on oil for 98% of its revenue.^[iii] Its fractured relationship with North Sudan is only the most visible external issue it faces. Another notable challenge it faces is the continued global economic crisis, which has reduced its ability to attract badly-needed foreign direct investment.

In addition, Khartoum, along with many other capitals around the world, began deporting the now South Sudanese citizens, many of whom had never actually been to Juba and were therefore being forced to uproot themselves and their families to start over from scratch in an entirely foreign place they now called home. Indeed, since October 2010 South Sudan has received about 350,000 refugees from Khartoum alone, although some 150,000 of these refugees have fled to South Sudan due to continued fighting on the borders.^[iv] Nonetheless, this has created an entire population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in various parts of South Sudan, which has heightened poverty and put further strain on the country's infrastructure.

The performance of the South Sudanese government has also failed to meet expectations. To be sure, its poor performance can be attributed at least in part to the sheer difficulty the challenges it faces. Nonetheless, high levels of corruption, mismanagement and the lack of a merit-based system for appointments have further exacerbated its governance woes. In short, the South Sudanese government is simultaneously confronting issues like famine, disease, illiteracy, underdevelopment, and internal tribal clashes among others, even as it struggles to transform itself into a government after decades of being a liberation movement.^[v]

In 'Third World', Statehood Still Matters

South Sudan is not the only region that demanded its secession from the artificially-made states of the 20th century. In Africa alone there have also recently been secession movements in Ghana and Botswana, and there is currently one in the Northern region of Somalia known as Somaliland. Some are even suggesting that the Western region of North Sudan, Darfur, seek to form a separate nation. As these examples illustrate, many groups in the so-called Third World still place great importance on attaining their own independent state. But as the South Sudanese government ends its first year it's worth asking, what does statehood entail in today's world? Are we as citizens of the world exaggerating statehood and thus our expectations of it?

Struggles for independence fill the pages of 20th Century history as groups the world over rose up to demand they be empowered to pursue this modern form of social organization. Having an independent state has been associated with national calls all over the world demanding territories and resources to be administered by 'indigenous people' instead of foreign occupiers. Independence was granted to one 'state' after the other and deciding the main population and borders each state would encapsulate was a matter of continuous dispute. Even after decades of struggles for independence throughout Africa, calls for further independence still resonate through much of the continent. Some of the minorities that were wrongly integrated into the larger framework of statehood have since suffered for decades under the iron-fist of a majority ruling elite that has often been manipulative and authoritarian. Rightly asking for their independence, upon achieving it they once again fall into the trap of majority and minority, as we are now witnessing in the form of inter-tribal clashes within South Sudan.

South Sudan: Statehood Exaggerated?

The problem is that we are somehow exaggerating statehood. The creation of the modern state was an entirely Western project that came to fruition in the years of bloodshed and wars that ended with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. At the time, many Europeans calculated that the sovereign state would be the best form of social organization to serve their economic and political interests. The peoples that were subsequently colonized by these nation-states had to shape their demands for freedom within the same framework, or jeopardize being cut out of the modern international community. So they demanded states but ended up forming quasi-states with borders drawn based on Western-written histories and the whims of authoritarian leaders who only had their personal interests at heart. Statehood was applied in a caricature manner that never fit the messy realities on the ground and their admission into the 'international community' was fake and never full.

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But they had no other option. That's why in spite of suggestions of the retreat of state – to borrow Susan Strange's term^[vi] – and the emergence of other forms of social organization and governance such as corporatism or local communities' management structures, we still hear demands for independence expressed in terms of statehood. People still believe in the old international system; in the UN, in the IMF and the World Bank and such. They believe that whatever they currently lack– whether it be good governance or modern financial systems – will be best obtained by joining the outside world. Whether there is some truth to this or not, it's very important to keep in mind in trying to evaluate states in today's international climate – especially the newly-born ones –the changing nature of statehood and that to become a state in the current international system is not the all 'exciting' event as it used to be hundreds of years ago. The old international system is definitely shifting and there are now new formations of governance and finance that are lending new insights and attempting to fix holes within the previous regime. In light of this, forming a nation-state might not be the most effective means of achieving ones end, as South Sudan's limited success suggests.

Moderate Scrutiny of South Sudan's Year

It's important to understand this complex context from which South Sudan's statehood has emerged as well as the changing nature of statehood in contemporary international relations in general. There were many expectations of South Sudan when it declared its independence and it has failed to live up to many of these not only during its first year as a sovereign state but also during the decades of civil wars and struggle for independence that came before it. The opportunities afforded by establishing a state are not as great as many tend to believe. Statehood itself is changing in nature and thus evaluating South Sudan's first year should be done moderately and any scrutiny should be within limits. All in all, and in spite of the hardship, it seems that the 98% of South Sudanese citizens who voted in favor of succession do not regret that choice.^[vii]

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[i] Taha, Hagar. "Darfur and South Sudan: United in Struggle, Divided by Future?" *e-International Relation*, 9 September 2011 <<http://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/09/darfur-and-south-sudan-united-in-struggle-divided-by-future>>, accessed on: 28 June 2012.

[ii] Wël, PaanLuel. "Viewpoint: South Sudan has not lived up to the hype," *BBC News*, 26 June 2012 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18550314>>, accessed: 28 June 2012.

[iii] Tekle, Tesfa-Alem "Ethiopia: State bank to expand more branches in South Sudan", *Sudan Tribune*, 11 May 2012.

[iiii] Wël, PaanLuel. "Viewpoint: South Sudanhas not lived up to the hype," *BBC News*, 26 June 2012 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18550314>>, accessed: 28 June 2012.

[iv] Rosen, Armen. "South Sudan Struggles With Independence," *The Atlantic*, 26 March 2012 <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/south-sudan-struggles-with-independence/255015>>, accessed on: 29 June 2012.

[v] Malwal, Makol Bona. "South Sudan: A Year Later – What to Do?" *All Africa*, 28 June 2012 <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201206290400.html>>, accessed on: 29 June 2012.

[vi] Strange, Susan. *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

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