

Can South Sudan Come Back from the Brink?

Written by Sarah Washburne

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SARAH WASHBURNE, FEB 17 2014

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This was a long time coming. South Sudan is ripe (and has been for a while) for a civil war. The international community needs to change how it operates in South Sudan if it wants to avoid a protracted conflict. The government of South Sudan needs to be given the tools to develop the country, rather than be a passive partner, watching the influx of agencies and foreign governments do its job for it. Government decentralization will help this happen, as will capacity-building programs at the local levels of governance. Until this occurs, the government of South Sudan will never be the legitimate representative of the people.

I spent a significant amount of time conducting research in South Sudan during the interim period, the time from 2005 to 2011 that was meant as a trial run for eventual statehood. While the politicians in Juba attempted to consolidate legitimacy for the South Sudanese Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the nascent government through ideological methods, it became clear that in the rural areas the government did not have support because of its inability to provide for the needs of the populace. The government of South Sudan lacks legitimacy, plain and simple, and this is why we are witnessing the current violence in the country.

In political theory, a regime or leader holds power through consolidating and maintaining legitimacy. David Easton states that “[t]he inculcation of legitimacy is probably the most effective device for regulating the flow of diffuse support in favor both of the authorities and of the regime.”[1] Indeed, since no rule can be enforced by power or coercion alone, the process of cultivating legitimacy and its promotion is of vital importance to the survival of any system or government. How a government or leader maintains legitimacy is in many ways up to the population. Sometimes the personality of a leader works well, other times only democratic or structural legitimacy suffices. In South Sudan the populace needs to be taken care of by the government; this is termed ‘eudaemonic legitimacy’.

While the main political party, the SPLM, focused on how it had ‘ended the war’ through an idealization of the past, this attempt at creating ideological legitimacy fell short. The people of South Sudan craved material benefits from the peace. Clean water. Roads. Education. Health care. Food security. When I went to the rural areas of the country- especially around Jonglei State, where much of the current violence is taking place- I heard a broken record: “The war has not yet ended for us” and “Where is the government?” The government would gain support if only it had the capacity to develop the country. When the government failed to meet the material needs of its citizens, people reverted to tribalism. Militarization based on tribal identity was not far away.

In the end, that Achilles Heel of Africa- tribalism- has prevented a successful state from emerging. Tribalism and patrimonialism is nothing new in Africa. However, there was hope that the ruling Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) could rise above tribalism for the good of the new country. The political rhetoric and ideology of the SPLM claimed to step above these debilitating forces. In the end, tribal loyalties overtook any sense of unity that the leaders of the SPLM sought to paint through their rhetoric. The divisions between the main two tribal groups, the Dinka and the Nuer, were magnified by a lack of development. Other tribal groups have also found themselves in conflict with the two dominant tribes.

While fighting between the Sudan and South Sudan (mostly) abated after the signing of the peace agreement in

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2005, inter-communal violence between the Nuer and the Dinka has only increased in rural areas. Jonglei State has seen the worst of it. Much of the fighting is over resources, mainly land access and cattle. This had led to the death of thousands of civilians over the past few years as well as the displacement of thousands more. The violence in Jonglei State was manipulated by political leaders for their own ends. The small, localized conflicts over cattle have transformed into highly politicized incidents, which only fanned the flames of discontent amongst the various ethnic communities.

This newest conflict is merely a magnification of the local-level conflicts occurring in Jonglei State. When Riek Machar, the leader of the second largest tribal group, was accused of organizing a failed coup by the leader of the main tribal group, President Salva Kiir, this was merely a continuation of the distrust between the Nuer and Dinka. What's more, the politicians in Juba are refusing to admit that this recent surge of violence is fueled by tribalism. This discontent from reality will only add fuel to the fire. Indeed, South Sudan is on the brink of civil war.

Why does what happens in a remote, land-locked African country even matter? South Sudan represents what could have been the successful end product of years of diplomacy and negotiations to bring an end to the world's longest civil war. The twenty-two year civil war was fought between the Islamist-led government in Khartoum and a rag tag group of rebels led by the charismatic John Garang. With significant exertion from the United States, as well as intense diplomatic efforts from Kenya, Ethiopia, Great Britain and Norway, a peace deal was signed in 2005. Here was an example of the international community, headed by an African-led initiative and supported by the United States, managing to get two embittered enemies to sit down at the negotiating table to come to a reasonable, peaceful solution. Here was the chance for a relatively successful partition of the largest country in Africa. This was the will of the people, decided through a referendum. Here was the opportunity to find that formula for building a country from scratch. Moreover, a country in Africa. The framework for the creation of the government of South Sudan was hashed out during negotiations in Kenya in the early to mid-2000's and its implementation was overseen by a myriad of international actors, including the United Nations, the United States, the African Union, the European Union and an enormous number of international non-governmental organizations.

To many, South Sudan was a blank slate at the end of the civil war in 2005. There was no government to speak of, though the SPLM's political wing claimed to rule with the consent of the people. Few permanent buildings existed. There were only around ten kilometers of paved roads in South Sudan. There was no electricity or running water anywhere in the region. The structure of the government, avenues for development, creation of law and order- all these were carefully planned out by the international community. Yet, in spite of billions of dollars from oil revenues and one of the largest presences humanitarian and development agencies in the world, South Sudan has little to show except a few new government buildings and some paved roads in Juba. There still is no electricity or running water. This is because the government lacks the capacity to create and maintain development projects. It has become too dependent on the international community.

Even if this current crisis is resolved, the experiment that is South Sudan is failing. The Dinka and Nuer tribes have been on a collision course for some time now. Government officials are corrupt and prone to patrimonialism. The government has failed to consolidate legitimacy because it cannot provide for the needs of the populace, and the top officials know no better than to turn to tribalism for support. At the end of the day, the majority of the South Sudanese population feel that the government of South Sudan, and by extension the SPLM, has failed to live up to expectations. These expectations were dependent on the development of the country. This lack of eudaemonic legitimacy, and the general poor state of people's lives, has led the South Sudanese population to rely on local politics and tribalism. In order for the country to move forwards and past the current threat of civil war, the government needs to build the capacity to develop the country. This includes providing basic infrastructure, health, education and food security. It also needs to empower the local governments. The international community is doing no favors for the government of South Sudan when it comes in and takes control of these projects. Capacity-building at all levels of the government is needed, and this can be augmented by government decentralization. If South Sudan plunges into civil war, then all the years of effort and money spent by the United Nations, foreign governments, and aid agencies, will be for nothing. South Sudan will join the league of failed African states.

[1] David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1965, 278.

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About the author:

Sarah Washburne is an independent researcher. She has lived and conducted fieldwork in Africa, primarily in Sudan and South Sudan.