

# Explaining the Political Crisis in South Sudan

Written by S.N. Sangmpam

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S.N. SANGMPAM, MAR 1 2014

The Republic of South Sudan was born on July 9, 2011, as a result of a secession war waged against Arab-dominated north Sudan in the 1950s. Barely two years after independence, a major military conflict erupted on December 15, 2013. It opposed governmental forces, loyal to President Salva Kiir, and a breakaway faction of the presidential guard and of the army that backed the former Vice President Riek Machar. Machar and his allies were accused by the president of an attempted coup d'état. Some of them were arrested and jailed. From Juba, the capital city, the military conflict spread to other towns and states. By February 2014, it had killed scores of belligerents and civilians. Attempts to solve the conflict, spearheaded by East African heads of state, were made in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with slow and snail-pace results. What caused the political conflict? And what is the solution?

### Causes of the Conflict

Two main causes can be advanced. The first is the "independence curse." South Sudan is a newly independent country. The historical record suggests that the immediate post-independence period has not been very kind to newly independent countries. Post-1804 Haiti, post-1827 South America, India around and after the 1947 independence-partition, the Congo in and after 1960, and more recently East Timor around and after 2002 are examples of the independence curse. In all these countries and many others, massive political conflicts erupted in the wake of independence. One of the reasons for this is that independence, like revolutions, is generally a temporary unifier. The need to overthrow the common oppressor brings different and even antagonistic groups together. Once this goal is attained, deep policy and ideological differences reappear. South Sudan, it can be reasonably argued, only follows the trend.

Second, like its counterparts in Africa, Asia, and South America, South Sudan is an overpoliticized state. Overpoliticization is the opposite of liberal compromise at the basis of liberal democratic rule in Western democracies. One of its main manifestations is the failure of political competitors to take off the table their irresolvable issues. As a result, political competition hardly leads to institutional and policy compromise. Instead, it often results in instability. [1] The socioeconomic situation in the developing world is one major trigger of overpoliticized behaviors. South Sudan is heavily dependent on oil for its revenues—98 percent of the total budget. Since independence, oil revenues and oil policies have been hampered by a number of factors. Border conflicts with North Sudan, dependence on North Sudan's facilities, port and pipelines for oil exports, and disagreements with North Sudan about transit fees for oil, all led to a temporary shutdown of oil production. South Sudan's attempts to remedy this situation have not been successful. Expected loans from international institutions and the request to China to build an alternative pipeline have fallen on deaf ears. And pervasive and unpunished corruption and nepotism have diverted crucial state resources. From 2005 to 2012 state officials had stolen about \$4 billion from the state's coffers. The consequences of this economic situation have been hyperinflation (around 80 percent in 2012), joblessness, and government's change of heart about paying tuition for university students. This reality unavoidably became part of the political competition in South Sudan. It triggered a pattern of overpoliticized behaviors. Among these, one counts vote rigging, armed rebellions, human rights violations by state officials, violent land disputes, and intertribal violence in the majority of the ten constitutive states of the country. The December 15 military conflict is, thus, both an outcome and parcel of these overpoliticized behaviors. They all are manifestations of politics played in the absence of liberal compromise.

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Yet, conflicts related to the independence curse or to overpoliticization involve real political protagonists. These protagonists' specific interests and situations as individuals, groups, classes, or countries and regions leave a special imprint on the conflicts. That is why political conflicts generated by the independence curse or by overpoliticization manifest themselves differently across countries and regions. Although South Sudan's political conflict may be linked to the independence curse and to overpoliticization, its specific political protagonists and situation impart to it its own peculiarity. What are, then, South Sudan's main political protagonists and the peculiarity of the December 15 conflict?

Undoubtedly, individuals, social classes, and professional groups have been active in the events surrounding the military conflict. President Kiir, his nemesis former vice-President Machar, and a cohort of military and bureaucratic officials have personal and professional interests and ambitions that fuel the conflict to a certain extent. Machar, for instance, has been accused by the Kiir government of being impatient. He wants political power so badly that he was willing to bypass the procedural rules of South Sudan's ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), regarding the selection of the party's and country's leadership. [2] Hence, his dismissal by Kiir and his attempted coup. This may be so. Nevertheless, the role of all these individual protagonists in the conflict is overshadowed by their tribal interests. War zone reporters, civilian victims of the fighting, and officials from both the government and the rebel sides tell us this much. The killings have opposed the two most important tribes of South Sudan, the Dinka and the Nuer. The two main figures in the conflict, Kiir and Machar, hail from the two tribes respectively. Their fighting forces, especially on the rebel side, are recruited on the basis of tribal allegiance. The question then becomes: why have the independence curse and overpoliticization taken the form of a tribal conflict in South Sudan?

The answer to this question is possible only in comparative and historical terms. It helps avoid the unintelligent discussions about "African tribalism" in "ethnic studies." Compared to all the developing regions of the world, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has the highest number of tribes—about 4600. By itself, Sudan has about 185 tribes. Why does SSA have more tribes than all other regions? Because of its exceptional geocology; it is more taxing than that of all the other regions. The harsh geocology caused massive migrations and splits. One of the best known of these migrations is the Bantu Migrations. Geocology-induced migrations were exacerbated by slavery—Atlantic and Arab. The result was a profusion of tribes. [3] The Dinka and the Nuer in South Sudan are outcomes of these migrations. Both are close relatives and they share this cousin relation with the Luo. The three tribes are part of the Western Nilotic subfamily of the broad Nilo-Saharan linguistic group of SSA. The present geographical location of the Dinka and the Nuer resulted from resource conflicts among the three cousin groups, provoked by harsh geocology and the need for migratory survival. The Nuer pushed the Dinka, who, in turn, pushed the Luo. [4]

The *ultimate consequence* of the migrations and profusion of tribes in SSA is *tribal horizontality*. Tribal horizontal relations are exclusive to SSA. They do not exist in other developing regions, including North Africa. They differ from vertical "ethnic" relations, observed in all the other developing regions. Vertical ethnic relations in North Africa, Asia, and South America are pyramidal, unequal, and dominated by one "ethnic" group politically, economically, and socially (e.g., Arabs in Sudan before partition and in North Sudan today, Arabs in North Africa and the Middle East, Europeans or Mestizos in South America, Han Chinese in China, Kinh in Vietnam, Indo-Aryans in India). By contrast, tribal horizontality in SSA rests on *assumed and built-in equality* among tribal groups. No tribal group dominates the others. This assumed equality begets demands by each tribal group—however small—to be given (or to take) equal chance to control political power. This may take the form of violent overthrow or fair or rigged election, even though the outcome does not necessarily reflect this equality. The Dinka-Nuer military conflict reflects, thus, the tribal horizontal equality-triggered demand by the Nuer tribal group for control of political power, which has been hitherto exercised by the Dinka. The demand is not new. During the war of secession against North Sudan, the Nuer waged war against the Dinka leadership and were led by the same Riek Machar. They denounced the Dinka-dominated leadership of the SPLA, the military wing of SPLM. They split from the SPLA in 1991 and defected to the government of Sudan; accepted jobs in Khartoum while waging the tribal war against the Dinka. [5]

Thus, the military tribal conflict in South Sudan resembles other tribal conflicts in SSA. They are not the same as or part of "ethnic conflicts" found everywhere in the world. Nor are they mysterious occurrences linked to "African mindset." [6] They are perfectly explainable. Yet their consequences are deadly and highly detrimental to the

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socioeconomic wellbeing and progress of SSA countries. The war in South Sudan, for instance, has destroyed the nascent and already precarious socioeconomic infrastructure. It has set back for many years whatever forward programs and modicum of progress the new country had achieved or was about to achieve. It has deepened socioeconomic stagnation and regression. The war has made it all the more harder for South Sudan to reduce its maternal mortality rate, which is the highest in the world.

## Solution

Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations in Addis Ababa to resolve the conflict, the solution will be only temporary and short-lived. South Sudan is likely to face recurrent conflicts because of the two major factors invoked in the foregoing analysis. First, overpoliticization will persist. The stagnant socioeconomic situation, which prevailed before the December 15 and which has been exacerbated by it, will result in many more overpoliticized behaviors. Second, tribal horizontal relations and the attendant equality-driven demands for control of political power will generate bitter competition over political power. This is likely to involve also tribes other than the Dinka and the Nuer. But the two supertribes will figure prominently in the competition. What, then, is the solution?

Even if overpoliticization can be reduced in potency in South Sudan, as observed in other developing countries, tribal horizontality will not be reduced. It provides the South Sudanese version of overpoliticization with its specific tribal content. Yet South Sudan does not have the monopoly on tribal horizontality. It is shared by and is *organic* for all SSA countries because of the historical reasons outlined above. Therefore, the solution for South Sudan and for other SSA countries ought to be *organic* as well. SSA must, as a whole, devise an institutional framework capable of *diluting* and rendering inoffensive tribes' expectations for equal control of political power generated by tribal horizontal relations. The institutional framework should deprive tribal protagonists of the country-based territorial, economic, and political conditions that make their equal search for political power attractive and destructive. To do so and to be an organic solution, the proposed institution must allow South Sudan to melt into SSA as a geographical, economic, and political whole. Because North Africa does not share the organic conditions of tribal horizontality with SSA, North Africa should be politically separated from SSA. African Union should be dismantled and replaced by a SSA-centered political union. By depriving South Sudan and other SSA countries of the country-based economic and political conditions that invigorate the equal tribal claim to political power, the SSA-centered political union dilutes these claims and renders them inoffensive. It prevents the type of political crisis faced in South Sudan. [A full elaboration of the rationale and design of this SSA-centered political union as the solution to the SSA predicament will be published soon.]

[1] S.N. Sangmpam, *Comparing Apples and Mangoes: The Overpoliticized State in Developing Countries*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007

[2] Interview of South Sudan's Foreign Minister with CCTV, February 2, 2014

[3] S.N. Sangmpam, "Why the African Union Should be Dismantled and Buried with Gaddafi," Forthcoming

[4] J.H. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966; James Newman, *The Peopling of Africa: A geographical Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, pp.160-64; Y.F. Hasan and B.A. Ogot, "Sudan, 1500-1800," in *UNESCO History of Africa, 5: Africa from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century*, edited by A.B. Ogot, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp.170-99

[5] Richard Dowden, *Africa: Altered States*, Public Affairs, 2009, pp. 163-79.

[6] S.N. Sangmpam, "Opening Old Wounds: Does Sub-Saharan Africa have Ethnicities or Tribes, and Why does it Matter?," Forthcoming

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### **About the author:**

S.N. Sangmpam is a professor of macro-comparative political economy, International Relations, and African American Politics at Syracuse University. He is the author of, among others, *Comparing Apples and mangoes: The Overpoliticized State in Developing Countries* and *Opening Old Wounds: Does Sub-Saharan Africa have Tribes or Ethnicities, and Why does It Matter?*