

Return to war in South Sudan

By Gunnar M. Sørbo

■ Executive summary

While the crisis in South Sudan that started in December 2013 was triggered by a power struggle in the ruling party (SPLM), the causes for the rapid breakdown of peace run deep. Over time, several rebel groups were integrated into the army (SPLA) without resolving the causes of their rebellions. The army therefore became a coalition of ethnic militias loyal to their commanders, and when the shooting started in Juba, the country blew apart along these fault lines. However, the idea that there are two discernible camps – i.e. a Dinka-dominated government and a Nuer-dominated opposition – is grossly inaccurate. South Sudan has been at odds with itself for a long time. A weak but centralised government, scarce resources, patronage politics, the legacy of war, and a lack of peace dividends have provided a recipe for crisis and collapse for years. While Uganda's military involvement has given the conflict a dangerous regional dynamic, the greater challenge will be to move beyond striking a narrow peace deal between the main belligerents that will likely only restore the status quo. In order to reach a sustainable political solution a comprehensive rethink of South Sudan's national project is required that will address the root causes of the conflict.

The current crisis in South Sudan began on December 15th 2013 at the end of a meeting of the National Liberation Council of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in Juba. How the violence was triggered remains contested. One version lays responsibility on President Salva Kiir, who became suspicious of his critics' intentions and decided to disarm officers and soldiers in his presidential guard who were believed to be loyal to the former vice president, Riek Machar. On their part, government officials described the conflict as an unsuccessful coup attempt by Machar in collaboration with several former cabinet ministers, who were then detained while Machar himself managed to escape.

In the next few days fighting spread rapidly to Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile states, while Machar declared his intention to bring down President Kiir's government. Opposition forces took control of the capitals of the three states (Bor, Bentiu and Malakal, respectively), but the towns all subsequently changed hands – four times in the case of Malakal, which has become a ghost town. Although an agreement for the cessation of hostilities was signed on January 23rd 2014, fighting continues.

The effect on human lives has been profound. The number killed remains unknown, but it is in the thousands and growing. Reports have also been received about sexual and gender-based violence; arbitrary arrests and detentions; enforced disappearances; torture; and the burning, looting and occupation of private property. By the end of February the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that over 740,000 people had been displaced in South Sudan. This number is still growing.

The causes of the crisis and the spread of warfare run deep. The following interconnected dimensions deserve particular mention.

Firstly, the crisis was triggered by a power struggle in the ruling party. The SPLM was never a cohesive movement and suffered from long-standing political disputes. During the war for South Sudan's independence from Sudan differences were to some extent suppressed in order to achieve a united front against the common enemy, the government of Sudan, but alliances like the one between Kiir and Machar were always vulnerable. In 1991 Machar linked up with Lam Akol to call for the replacement of the

SPLM leader at the time, John Garang. When the rebels were unsuccessful they formed a break-away faction known as SPLM-Nasir, and in November 1991 Machar's Nuer forces attacked Bor and killed around 2,000 Dinka civilians. With the support of Khartoum, these forces and other militia groups made it possible for the Sudanese government to pump oil from fields in southern Sudan. Machar returned to the SPLM in 2001. This was important for the ability to move towards peace and independence, and the power-sharing arrangement between Kiir and Machar was a necessary compromise in a situation of weak institutions and strong ethnic loyalties.

The "reconciliation" between Kiir and Machar was part of a pattern whereby a number of rebels were accommodated in the government or the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) without actually resolving the causes of their rebellions. These processes of "reconciliation" (Mamdani, 2014) were driven by short-term considerations and led to the SPLA being composed of different armed factions that were incorporated into the army as their commanders made peace deals with the government. The South Sudan Defence Forces, which was the last major group to be integrated (2006), was almost comparable in size to the SPLA, and its incorporation resulted in the SPLA becoming a majority Nuer army that drew more than half of its recruits from 20% of the population. As soldiers from various external forces were integrated into it, the SPLA grew in size to almost 200,000 personnel. According to De Waal (2014), there are 745 generals in the army, more than in the four U.S. armed services combined, and before the December 15th rebellion over 50% of the government's budget was spent on paying the armed forces.

International media were quick to portray the conflict as an "ethnic war" between Dinka and Nuer, who between them make up more than half of South Sudan's population, with the Dinka outnumbering the Nuer by a factor of 2 to 1. As soon as the first shots were fired the fighting took on the character of ethnic targeting, first on the Nuer in Juba because of their perceived connection with Riek Machar, which then gave justification to the Nuer to retaliate against Dinka communities perceived to be associated with Salva Kiir and the government. In times of crisis such as this political leaders mobilise their power bases along ethnic lines, while different army units are drawn from different ethnic groups. The country therefore blew apart along these fault lines and the more the conflict was framed as "ethnic fighting" by all involved the more it moved towards tribal or ethnically defined war (Le Riche, 2014).

It is important to note, however, that several of the opposition figures detained by the government were in fact Dinka and that other ethnic groups have also been targeted, particularly the Shilluk, by opposition forces in Upper Nile. Such violence, particularly the terrible acts committed by the so-called White Army (a group of armed youth originating in Nuer cattle camps), also suggests that Machar may not be in control of all opposition forces and that much of

the inter-community violence is driven by local agendas. The idea that there are two discernible camps – the Dinka-dominated government and the Nuer-dominated opposition – is therefore grossly inaccurate. Those detained and arrested in Juba may have expressed oppositional views about the president, but they have not pledged loyalty to Machar and have in fact formed a "Third Platform" during the peace talks under way in Addis Ababa. The Equatorians (who belong to many different ethnic groups) have so far been sitting on the sidelines, which may quickly change, because rumours are circulating that they may be targeted by government forces.

Overall, South Sudan has been at odds with itself for a long time. A combination of scarce resources, fragmented elites, patronage politics, and a proliferation of government structures and ethnic fiefdoms have lessened accountability and intensified the violent struggle over access to resources and political space. There has been weak law enforcement and a failure to deliver services, while most people feel disconnected from a government that has been unable to create a vision and direction that South Sudan's citizens can believe in (Schomerus et al., 2010). Add the spread of modern arms, growing numbers of unemployed youth, the legacy of war, and the lack of peace dividends and we have a recipe for crisis and breakdown.

There is a huge longing for peace throughout South Sudan, but at the time of writing the prospects for a political solution to the current crisis are not promising. Fighting continues and both parties are taking a confrontational stance. A court case has opened against the four people who are still detained in Juba, including the former secretary general of the SPLM, Pagan Amum. The government has also accused the UN Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS) of taking sides against Kiir in favour of Machar after intercepting arms en route to Unity State that according to UNMISS were meant for its Ghanaian peacekeepers. There is a campaign to undermine the position of Hilde Frafjord Johnson, who heads the mission. The efforts of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have also been adversely affected by Uganda's intervention to support the regime in Juba, showing again that conflicts in the region are never fully "internal". Despite the historic ties between Khartoum and Machar, President Bashir quickly pledged support to President Kiir, one reason probably being the dire need of both presidents to maintain oil production. The South Sudan Commission of Inquiry established by the African Union to investigate human rights violations and other abuses committed during the ongoing conflict is justified on many grounds, but it may also result in more violence.

While stopping the civil war is an absolute priority, the first step in finding a long-term solution is the recognition of its root causes. Power-sharing and old-style "reconciliation" without political reform will more than likely be a dress rehearsal for another crisis. Meaningful reform need to begin with the demands made by the opposition, including

civil society actors; these would include dismantling warlordism, clarifying an overarching vision for the country, and embarking on a process towards national healing and good governance.

It will need great involvement from the region to create conditions for peace and meaningful reform in South Sudan. For this to be possible, one needs to keep in mind both the internal and external realities of the situation. The internal reality is that reform will have to be imposed on a reluctant Salva Kiir from the outside and that those who oppose him belong to many camps. The external reality is that reform may also be opposed by Uganda, which committed an estimated 4,500 troops to make a military solution possible.

The way forward calls for the replacement of Ugandan troops with troops from other countries in the region – specifically countries without a direct political stake in South Sudan and with a mandate and the political will to oversee the implementation of the necessary political reforms. As a step in the right direction, IGAD has authorised the rapid deployment of regional forces in South Sudan.

This may be the easy part. The larger challenge will be to avoid reproducing the worst historic trends of Sudanese negotiations, i.e. that they only include armed actors, while others have a very minor role to play other than suffering the consequences of violence. In order to reach a sustainable political solution to the current crisis a comprehensive rethink of South Sudan's national project is required that moves beyond striking a narrow peace deal that will likely only return the country to the status quo and set up the next, inevitable round of violence.

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