Republic of South Sudan: From North-South to Nuer-Dinka Conflict

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Abstract

Even though peace and stability anticipated to the South Sudan after its independence from Sudan, conflict and instability continue to be the order of the day in the country. Currently, conflict in South Sudan appears to have ethnic character. Accordingly, the conflict is sponsored by the two largest ethnic groups, namely Dinka and Nuer. This paper argues that the prevailing ethnic violence in South Sudan is the spillover effect of the power competition between political leaders of those ethnic groups', namely Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, respectively. Hence, the current crisis of the country requires a political solution.

Keywords:

South Sudan; the North; Sudan; Civil war; Current crisis; Power Struggle; Ethnic violence

THE GENESIS OF NORTH-SOUTH CONFLICT

Sudan had been torn apart by long and protracted civil wars since very long time ago. The issues of whether Sudan is to be secular state and its federal arrangement was not settled by the constitution of Sudan on its independence, in 1956 (Standard Digital, 2014). This problem contributed Sudan to experience North-South civil wars, from 1955-1972 and from 1983-2005. In the first civil war Southerners fought for greater autonomy as the Khartoum government betrayed its promise of federal structure. President Jaafar Nimeiri's decision to

introduce Sharia law caused the second phase of the civil war where Southerners demanded for self determination, freedom of worship, and equal distribution of resources (*ibid*). The discovery of oil in 1978 had added fuel to the prevailing conflict between these two parties. Oil was discovered near to North-South boundary; thereby pushing the North to sustain its control of the area while motivating the South to struggle for controlling of the same (Ottaway and El-Sadany, 2012: 5).The experienced civil wars caused tremendous effect in the life of many Sudanese. In 2005 a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the two parties with the support of countries, regional organizations and civil societies, thereby ending the long and devastating civil wars. The agreement made providing optimism to Southerners pertaining to the long standing war of autonomy and self-determination.

The CPA provided ground for future referendum of South Sudan whether to secede or continue as part of Sudan. The referendum was held in January 2011 with great majority of the vote in favour of independence. The emergence of the Republic of South Sudan was formally announced on July. The separation of South Sudan with some potential areas was

unwelcomed event for North Sudan. Hence, CPA brought only political divorce while the conflict between the two states continues to prevail. Many factors contributed to the North-South civil war in the post-independence period. Among these, the existence of porous border where major commercial transactions has been took place has contributed a lot (Mwanika, 2012). Most importantly, oil appears to be the critical bone of contention between North and South Sudan as both of them relied mainly on oil revenue (Ottaway, 2012). As a result, conflict escalated in their border area increasing the causality. In the midst of its fighting with North Sudan, South Sudan engaged into internal wars and crises.

NUER-DINKA CONFLICT

The independence of Republic of South Sudan was assumed to be a panacea for South Sudan. Its independence was followed by sense of optimism and high hope that the country will be stable and governed by a democratic government on the basis of justice and equality. Peace was anticipated to prevail in the newly emerging country. However, as can be seen the reality on the ground South Sudan is in a constant turmoil. Despite unification for common enemy, the North, Southern communities are still in a conflict as far as their internal state is concerned. There are many rebel groups and militias operating in the country (*ibid*). The torn apart of communities by recurrent war complicated the effective control of the newly established government over the entire state. South Sudan has experienced several insurrections. However, the current civil war which erupted in December 2013 has, in terms of causality figure, a tremendous effect. Presently, it has wide media coverage and attracted the attention of international community. Hence, this paper concerns mainly on the current South Sudan civil war, its effect and its underlying cause and the possible solutions thereto.

After the independence of the Republic of South Sudan the Dinka ethnic group with Salva Kiir presidency began to rule the world's newest country. In December 2013 Kiir proclaimed that there was attempted failed coup d'état which was orchestrated by Riek Machar, Vice President of South Sudan, to topple down the government. Following this assertion, in the mid-December 2013, deadly violent conflict erupted between the opposition forces led by Machar and the central government under President Salva Kiir (Blanchard, 2014: 1). The alleged coup attempt, which plunged the country into current violence, has been expressly denied by Machar. And the conflict continues to ignite several areas. In the course of the war forces loyal to Machar took control of Jonglei, Unity States, and Upper Nile. To regain such territories the Kiir loyal forces (SPLA) opened war with the opposition forces. The war has become brutal in such states as the opposition forces continue to capture broader area (*ibid*). This violence has greatly affected South Sudan as it had been under the Arab rule of North Sudan. Simply, it is a matter of parties' difference, from North-South to Nuer-Dinka conflict. President Salva Kiir is from the dominant ethnic group, Dinka constituting 36 percent of the population, whereas Vice President Riek Machar is from the second largest ethnic group constituting 16 percent of the population (Koos and Gutschke 2014: 2). Hence, the prevailing conflict in South Sudan has ethnic dimension as rivalry leaders represent those dominant groups and rally them.

The conflict is spreading across several states of South Sudan. The conflict which started in Juba and extended to Jonglei, Unity States, and Upper Nile is now

expanded to Greater Bahr el Ghazal, and rising tensions further threaten to drag in the relatively peaceful Equatorian states (ICG, 2014). The Equatorians and the SPLM/A-IO demand the foundation of federalism which could avoid wealth and power monopoly by Dinka-dominated central government (*ibid*). The two individuals' rivalry that caused the civil war is now spreading to vast areas of the country mobilizing massive population along their ethnic line.

Effects

The pre-independence history of South Sudan was characterized by "decades of marginalization, oppression, civil strife and war, deep-seated political and ethnic divisions and weak institutional capacity" (Mwanika, 2012). It has shouldered the cost of long protracted civil wars. Now too, conflict returned to within South itself and the usual causality began to occur from the time of its independence. Specially, in the current crisis, there have been targeted attacks on Dinka ethnic group, while soldiers of Dinka have also committed atrocities on civilians on the basis of Nuer ethnicity (Global Centre, 2013). The causality of this recent ethnic violence, which is the main focus of the paper, outnumbered the damages sustained previously since the time of independence. For example, more than 10,000 people have lost their life and beyond one million displaced during infightings in this current crisis (Koos and Gutschke 2014: 1). Besides, 405,600 South Sudanese have leaved their home land and fled to neighboring countries (OCHA, 2014a). The most important refuges destinations are Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan (Lindborg, 2014). The conflict also estimated to cause problem of food shortage for around 3.7 million people (OCHA, 2014b). This conflict-induced famine shows the need to halt, primary, the

prevailing conflict so as to overcome such shortage of food. The problem of food insecurity is exacerbated by the hindrances to the international attempts to provide food assistance to conflict-ravaged areas of South Sudan (USAID, 2014). The best example, in this regard, is the looting of World Food Program (WFP)-contracted trucks which would have otherwise been used for thousands of internally displaced peoples.

What causes the current violence?

The political friction, within SPLM, between Kiir and Machar is one of the principal factors which lead to the outbreak of the latest violence in South Sudan. Kiir and Machar disagree on the matter who should head the party in 2015. Both individuals announced their respective interest to run for presidency in the election to be held in 2015. Notwithstanding the stance of Machar to be elected in the upcoming election, president Kiir fired him together with most of his cabinets, thereby minimizing his potential leadership contenders. Actually, the political division within SPLM is not a post-independence phenomenon. SPLM was divided into two rival parties in the 1991 as Machar, together with other officers, departed from the then commander-in-chief, John Garang, a Bor Dinka (this will be discussed later). The internally fragmented South Sudanese collaborated in fighting against the common enemy, the North. Later, up on the deterioration of North-South conflicts, the interethnic conflict between Nuer and Dinka began to revive following power struggle of their respective leaders, and thereby resuming their previously existing hostilities.

Political exclusion and lack of good governance, *inter alia*, were significant driving forces for the last long tragic civil

Republic of South Sudan: From North-South to Nuer-Dinka Conflict *Endalcachew Bayeh*

wars until 2005 (Reeve, 2012: 6). In the same manner, the prevalence of power struggle, marginalization and exclusion of individuals from political leadership are the underlying factors to the occurrence of the current intra-South Sudan destructive violence. As a result of Kiir's demand to take control of the country's governance system, the contending officers are removed from leadership position. Those angered politically excluded individuals began to mobilize the people along their ethnic line, thereby providing conflict in South Sudan ethnic component. Thus, the root at the current ethnic violence in South Sudan is denial of political accommodation for certain political officers. The political friction of the two individuals has caused clashes between factions they represent. The targeted attack on Nuer by incumbent government is the main factor for mobilization of Nuer ethnic groups on the Machar's side to counter attack the opposite ethnic group. After the outbreak of violence political leaders and militias work towards their ethnic identity by putting aside their national allegiance (Genser, 2014). It is recently reported that Kiir encouraged Dinka ethnic groups to stand against the Nuers stating that "You, the Dinka of Rumbek, why are you fighting yourselves and not your enemies? The Nuers are coming to fight you. You should [wait] for your enemies the Nuer to fight you," (Tesfa-Alem, 2014). This utterance of the president to stand the Dinkas together against the common enemy, Nuers, clearly shows the degeneration of political split into the outbreak of ethnic violence. Now, the rebel groups are accusing Kiir of calling such tribal conflicts.

What fueled the current violence?

Though the emphasis is given to the Kiir-Machar rivalry as a major factor to the outbreak of current crisis in South Sudan it doesn't mean that there are no other contributing factors to the problem. There are other issues which added fuel to the prevailing calamity. A dysfunctional political system, lack of skill to build South Sudanese identity transcending ethnic boundaries, and poor provision of public goods and services have contributed their part to the war (Koos and Gutschke 2014: 1).

Above all, the most important contributing factor is the historical Nuer-Dinka relations. As hinted above, the Nuer-Dinka difference has dated back to the era of civil war where they were fighting the North. Though Nuer and Dinka had cooperated in fighting their common enemy, they had no smooth relation. During the North-South civil war SPLM cracked down as a result of power competition between John Garang (Dinka), leader of SPLM, and his deputy, Riek Machar (Nuer) (*ibid*). Due to this friction Machar committed atrocities on the Dinka ethnic groups by making ally with the Khartoum government. This has stayed in the mind of the victim groups and has contributed in aggravating the current instability. Dinkas recall the departure of Machar from SPLM in the course of struggling to South Sudanese independence and the atrocities he made by taking side with the Khartoum government. This caused unforgettable memory in the side of Kiir and Dinkas at large though Machar apologized for the sustained 'Bor massacre'. Hence, this awful sentiment added fuel into the latest violence occurred in the country to flamed and have ethnic character.

The way forward

The current as well as historical division, as discussed above, within the SPLM and the consequence thereof in South Sudan has

Republic of South Sudan: From North-South to Nuer-Dinka Conflict *Endalcachew Bayeh*

emanated from power struggle between political leaders. In the 1991 the power struggle between John Garang and Machar left with loss of many civilians' life. The power struggle between Kiir and Machar also resulted in the current intense ethnic violence, which has caused a devastating effect on civilians. Since political leaders in both cases represent the two most populous ethnic groups, the conflict between those individuals created an ethnic tone. Hence, the political rivalry among SPLM leaders soon degenerated into ethnic violence. Putting differently, the root at the current South Sudan crisis is political not ethnic one.

Therefore, the ultimate solution for the prevailing violence in South Sudan is political one. In the effort to avert the existing conflict concerned bodies (mediators) need to stress on the political arrangement so that the conflicting parties will solve their chronic problem and engage into collaborative work of the already started project of nation-building. Accordingly, this paper suggests the following possible strategies in the process of averting the prevailing conflict as well as its spillover effect in several aspects. Considering the diversity of the country, the establishment of proper federal system is a matter of necessity not something optional. The system of governance should be restructured to instill a true federal system representing the diversity of the country. As root cause of the prevailing ethnic conflict is political in nature, the ultimate solution would be providing political space to the respective ethnic group. It is after their political rift that both leaders mobilize their respective ethnic groups in accumulating military resources and personnel. Hence, political measure should be taken to overcome such political rivalry. It is also important to note that an equal opportunity should be given for all

potential contenders to run for the upcoming 2015 election. In this case, the Kiir's group needs to allow the Machar to compete in the 2015 election. Given his representation of the second largest ethnic group in the country, banning Machar from competition will be unfair and remain the country plunged into ethnic violence. Above all, the issue of political tolerance should be maintained. Each contending groups should be ready to obey the result of the election. Otherwise, the whole peace endeavor will remain without fruit.

In the overall effort to avert the existing conflict deployment of security force is crucial. The deployment of force will create buffer zone between the two conflicting parties; monitor the ceasefire reached in the overall mediation process; and build confidence between conflicting parties. Further, the deployment of peacekeeping forces will reduce the continuation of conflicts disregarding the ceasefire agreement, like what happened for the January and May agreements which failed to prevent the ongoing conflict. The security force will also assist in the proper delivery of humanitarian aid to the conflict-affected areas. In this connection, besides additional deployment, consolidating the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMSS) is highly recommended.

External sanction has also significant place in reducing the escalation of conflict in the country as it discourages the potential of conflicting parties. In this regard the current EU sanction imposed on South Sudan rival leaders with the view of restoring peace in the country can be taken as a positive start, while recommended for other international and regional actors too.

Conclusion

Republic of South Sudan: From North-South to Nuer-Dinka Conflict *Endalcachew Bayeh*

The hope for peace and stability in South Sudan after its independence appeared to be short lived. Soon after, the country plunged into internal wars. Most importantly, the civil war, which broke out in December 2013 due to power competition, quickly changed to have ethnic dimension engaging the two largest ethnic groups into war of each other. The current ethnic violence has caused devastating causalities. And several attempts have been made to stabilize the situation in the country. As power is at the root of the prevailing conflict in South Sudan, the paper suggests a political solution. Accordingly, proper federal arrangement with competitive election is recommended to avert the existing conflict while deployment of security force is also crucial to monitor ceasefire agreements.

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