DYNAMICS OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONFLICTS IN SOUTH SUDAN

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Lasting over four decades, this South Sudanese civil war led to the death of an estimated 2.5 million people and the displacement of some 4.6 million people. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the warring factions formally ended the civil war and led to the creation of the independent country of South Sudan in 2011. Fewer than two-and-a-half years after independence, large-scale violence again erupted at the end of 2013. A formal peace agreement between the conflicting parties was signed in August 2015 (Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan, ARCSS), which proved unsuccessful and was, after almost three years of further fighting, 'revitalized' in 2018 (R-ARCSS).

The post-independence conflict shifted the geography of conflicts from Greater Equatoria Region, before the CPA, to the Greater Upper Nile Region, after independence. With the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in January 2014, however, the conflict events started declining considerably. During the beginning of the dry season, the conflict events started increasing after December 2014 and continued till the end of the dry season in May 2015.

The structural causes of the conflict in South Sudan are rooted in interwoven political, economic, social and environmental issues that undermine sustainable peace (REACH, 2014:10). Generally, the current violent conflict in South Sudan originates from the struggle for political power and weak political capacity given the underdevelopment of political institutions and political accommodation. The lack of strong, effective institutions both at the local and national level for the peaceful management of disputes or competing claims to power contributed to the political dispute within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Move

ment/Army (SPLM/A) that degenerated into a national crisis from December 2013 (FAO, 2016).

Proximate causes that likely continue to contribute in generating an environment for violent conflict in South Sudan include increasing military conscription since the signing of 2005 CPA, the proliferation of small arms, and the mobilization of ethnicity within the political environment (Small Arms Survey, 2014). These political drivers of violent conflict have exacerbated existing tensions and promoted cattle-related violent culture (REACH, 2014:12). The recruitment patterns were often linked to efforts of security sector reform and demobilization. These efforts often led to the creation of 'ghost soldiers' through vast overestimations of troop sizes given by commanders to bolster their military-political power play. When the processes actually started, these ghost soldiers needed then to be recruited, resulting in the travesty that efforts to reduce troop sizes de facto resulted in their expansion.

The proximate social drivers of the current conflict include: politicization of ethnicity; weak property rights coupled with massive displacement since December 2013, affecting one in five South Sudanese; and, a prevalent culture of fear and increased human rights abuses that have intensified since December 2013 (REACH, 2014). Economic proximate drivers of conflict in South Sudan include: a lack of economic diversification and over-reliance on oil; non-existent or poor infrastructure; weak public financial management; disruption of agriculture planting season, migration pattern and market networks, and insecure food insecurity.

Conflict triggers in South Sudan include: the failure of the CPA to address (often localized) inter – and intra-community tensions; an absence of effective pro-

cesses of reconciliation and healing to resolve legacies of violence, loss, anger and trauma; the outbreak of conflict in Juba – in December 2013 that triggered fighting elsewhere in the country and proxy fighting spill over from other regions. The mobilization of young men as fighters pre-dated the December 2013 violence, since the signing of CPA in 2005; over 100 communal militias have been active in the country. Battles involving ethnic and communal militias increased considerably from 2013, 2014, 2016, and now 2020.

Post-independence conflict dynamics

When South Sudan gained its independence on 9 July 2011, there were high hopes that the new country would bring to peace and stability within itself and throughout the region. In 2012, however, the country entered into war with Sudan in less than one year, over the claim of the oil-rich border area of Panthou (Hijilg). And within less than three years, a political dispute occurred within the ruling party in December 2013.These developments raise fundamental questions about the nature and causes of the violent conflict.

Some attributed the cause of the violent conflict to an attempted coup, whilst others referred to attempts to silence government rivals, along with weak state institutions, power imbalances, and the militarization of government institutions (African Union, 2014). Kuol (2015c) provides a holistic framework for analyzing the dynamics of the violent conflict in South Sudan, although the continued conflicts as explained by other observers that general grievances, unemployment of youth, the legacy of past wars in term of national level and weak institutions and poor policies are the primary factors leading to continues conflict in South Sudan.

Not just an 'ethnic' conflict

One of many challenges to making sense of conflict in South Sudan is that it is often described as being simply ethnic or 'tribal', but such descriptors capture only part – if any – of the forces at work. The dynamics and purposes of cattle raiding vary according to group norms not only within ethnic groups but also within subgroups such as clans and age-sets and have also shifted markedly over time as traditional authorities have lost influence and as militarized mindsets, tactics and weaponry rooted in the war have continued to pervade 'peace' time. As a result, extreme and indiscriminate violence has become more commonplace and made 'traditional' raiding attacks more difficult to differentiate from other types of social and political conflict.

Ethnic group loyalties are often said to explain the underpinnings of national power struggles, as well. While they may indeed influence support for government figures and group membership is certainly not the only determinant of political loyalty, and such explanations of South Sudan's highly complex political dynamics are over-simplifications at best.

Conflict in South Sudan in the post-independence years remains multi-layered. It has grown in complexity since the war period, with multiple intra-group, inter-group and international dynamics as well as political, economic and socio-cultural drivers.

Governance

South Sudan has been plagued by governance challenges and widely perceived as an extremely weak state since its birth, and the presence of the state in all the states are faint. Laudati (2011: 22) notes that 'pervasive poverty, combined with continuing insecurity, lack of infrastructure, and limited market opportunities have combined to create a general landscape of deprivation, discrimination and marginalization'. The dominance of the SPLM in national and state affairs, and perceptions among some ethnic groups that the SPLM has been dominated by Dinka, mean old grudges dating back to the war period are now entangled in people's feelings toward the state. At the same time, these associations suggest any missteps by the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) today, regardless of provenance, are likely then woven back into perceptions of the SPLM and the various ethnic and political affiliations of its leaders.

GoSS has always faced a significant security dilemma: as a weak government with little institutional and logistical capacity or legitimacy to exercise its authority over citizens in a meaningful way, it has often been unable to control its own soldiers and security services, much less effectively disarm the population and create or keep the peace between civilians at all levels. In addition, while there are systems of customary law of varying strength, the dearth of an effective legal and justice system at the state and local levels means violence is often committed with impunity, further undermining the state's authority and contributing to the population's deep distrust of the nominal institutions of order (Jok, 2013). At the same time, GoSS' attempts to assert authority, because they have tended toward the extreme, have often undermined their own purpose and created an even more pre

carious situation. The result has been a lot of rhetoric about order and authority that has belied the situation on the ground, in which security is the overwhelming unrealized priority for much of the population (Pospisil et al., 2020).

The Western state-building paradigm on which aid and political support to South Sudan have been based hews to the Weberian belief that the state is ultimately responsible for the security of its citizens, and derives its power from adequately fulfilling that responsibility and maintaining a monopoly on the use of violence. GoSS has never had such a monopoly, nor has it been able to ensure a basic level of citizen safety. These tandem problems virtually ensure a continuing cycle of violence among all the parties, because no one across the country is likely to willingly abdicate their right to defend themselves (more than they already have, in the case of reported Nuer and Dinka disarmament, questionable though it may be) and fully lay down arms until they have faith that GoSS can provide a reliable modicum of security in its place. For instance, currently, the narrative of Murle and Dinka aggression in Jonglei has served the government because it provides a reasonable-sounding excuse for GoSS' own failure to effectively protect the population.

Disarmament

Disarmament has played a significant role in the development of the conflict in the whole country to its current situation. In response to the violence in 2011/12 in Jonglei and to international pressure for peacebuilding, GoSS attempted another round of disarmament in Pibor and also re-launched the peace process that had been stalled since 2010.At the same time, in January 2012, GoSS announced compulsory civilian disarmament in Jonglei for the fourth time since the CPA (DDG et al., 2012). Disarmament proceeded in Pibor under questionable conditions. Similar to previous disarmament campaigns, perceived by both targeted communities and outside observers as highly politicized, violently coercive and bent on discipline and punishment rather than being voluntary and building peace (HRW, 2009; O'Brien, 2009; Rands and LeRiche, 2012). Most recently, in August 2020, another disarmament campaign by the South Sudanese armed forces in Tonj, Warrap State, has resulted in more than a hundred people getting killed.

One thing is certain: none of the disarmament efforts thus far has addressed key conflict drivers, nor provided for civilian safety (O'Brien 2009; DDG et al. 2012).

Violence against civilians in the course of disarmament efforts is one of the most commonly cited reasons for the failure of those efforts and Jonglei's resulting continued insecurity overall, in that the civilian population remains armed and now harbors tremendous animosity toward the SPLA (Jok 2013).

Citizen safety and security sector instability

The security sector has numerous problems that compound one another, including too many people, too little training, too few resources and too many political entanglements. At the end of the war in 2005, the task of the SPLM/A was to effectively transition from an armed rebel movement into a governing political party and a separate, professionalized national military, as well as to build a functional civilian police force and justice system. At the same time, multiple armed factions previously operating in parallel, if not direct opposition, to the SPLA had to be neutralized, which in many cases meant incorporating them into the SPLA with the promise of salaries and other gains. There is no doubt the task was Herculean at best, and GoSS' efforts did meet with some success in the first years following the CPA. The resulting forces were, however, bloated with soldiers with various loyalties and often operating at cross purposes (Mailer and Poole, 2010).

Conclusions and recommendations

Jok (2013: 1) argues that the factors that must be addressed in order to begin to mitigate conflict include 'division of resources and power, delivery of services such as education, infrastructure such as roads, investment in the youth, control of firearms and restructuring of the state's monopoly of force so as to prevent the actions of some soldiers from further inflaming the situation', among others. In other words, the causes of local- and state-level conflict are multiple, and there has never been a single solution (such as peace talks or service delivery) that would put a stop to it. The paradox of post-independence state-building in general, and conflict mitigation in South Sudan, is that the stability and predictability of the situation are simultaneously the prerequisites and the intended outcome.

Social and political cohesion could provide a firm foundation for state- and nation-building, but they are far from assured in South Sudan. The country is a menagerie of more than 60 ethnic groups, many of which reside in largely homogeneous, geographically separated pockets. Like many states on the African continent, the fact that such a diverse collection of

people share a common fate owes much more to the historical legacy of colonialism than it does to any sense of shared identity, language, religion or cultural practice.

South Sudan needs a considerable amount of political will on the part of local leaders for national peace-building to happen. It is only then that a gradual process of conflict resolutions and sustainable peace-building can be initiated at the grassroot level and can bear fruits at the national level. Conflicts in South Sudan has affected all communities directly through the loss of human lives and assets, impoverishment, restrictions of movements and loss of personal safety and security.

It's important to not simply decry the unfortunate effects of linkages between conflict processes at different levels. These linkages were initiated by strategic actors pursuing their own interests as best they could, and policy advocates need to take account of their likely response to proposed reforms. Some way must be found to encourage at least some of the major participants that they can more effectively pursue their interests in other means. Those who prefer to continue to rely on violent means must be resisted, but in ways that do not contribute to the perpetuation of this multi-layered system of violence. It is a daunting challenge, but one that the inter-national community can effectively address only when the structures underlying dynamic patterns of conflict are more fully understood. In particular, the following three recommendations appear pivotal:

- The political complexity of South Sudan conflicts suggests that no single level of conflict can be effectively resolved without carefully addressing conflicts at all levels. Therefore, policy intervention needs to address the two levels of local and national. At local level, the communities should be encouraged to respect traditional means of conflict resolution.

- The linkages between different conflict actors in South Sudan across levels and regions, and their own interests and policy advocates need to be taken into account for any reform agenda. Those actors who continue to rely on violent means to be rejected in a way that do not contribute further to

multi-layered conflict and structures underlying dynamics.

- Violent conflicts in South Sudan are becoming dangerously normalized at all levels. Establishing a focus strategy on the national and local levels to prevent displacement and create spaces for inter-ethnic engagement can mitigate criminality which is increasing. Such effort has to look beyond capital Juba and should focus on communities at the lower level.

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Christopher Oringa, Institute of Peace, Development and Security Studies University of Juba, South Sudan