**A comment on “Diversity, Unity, and Nation Building in South Sudan” by Dr. Jok Madut**

*The struggle for freedom from the grip of the Khartoum government has been the most unifying force for South Sudanese. Now that this struggle has borne fruit and there is no more north to blame, what will unite South Sudanese is the desire to build a nation with a shared identity—Dr. Jok Madut Jok of the United State Institute of Peace.*

**By PaanLuel Wel, Washington DC, USA**

On the occasion that South Sudanese were marking World Peace Day in Juba—September 21st, a special report entitled “Diversity, Unity, and Nation Building in South Sudan” was released byDr. Jok Madut Jok, a South Sudanese professor of African studies in the department of history at Loyola Marymount University—USA, and a senior fellow at the United State Institute of Peace in Washington DC, USA.

The report was prepared and released as “part of a series of U.S. Institute of Peace reports on

state building in South Sudan, [focusing] on how the new state will manage its cultural diversity with a view to bringing all its ethnic nationalities together, forming a national identity that can reduce the level of suspicion and ethnicity-based political rivalry.”

The report argues that new emerging countries such as the Republic of South Sudan invariably find it hard to achieve long lasting peace and meaningful national unity. Frequently, this elusiveness to attain peace and order is due to total failure by the new leadership to avail “expected dividends of independence.”

Mostly, the report maintains, this failure to deliver is occasioned, for the case of South Sudan, by two main factors: those from within which are sometimes self-inflicted by those in power and those from without and of which the new leadership may or may not have control over, the looming border war with the north, for example.

Among the findings of the report is that “poor infrastructure, a volatile political climate, limited capacity for governance, weak state institutions, financial crises, violent ethnic divisions, and an uncertain regional and international political atmosphere” are some of the evils that are seriously threatening the transformation of South Sudan into a viable nation.

And despite the initial excitement and anticipation towards the new nation, the report has it that “claims of corruption, nepotism, exclusion, and domination of government and business by some ethnic groups” have substantially dampened and “erode public’s enthusiasm for the upcoming transition” into nationhood.

Another issue addressed by the report is the apparent “lack of a respectable constitution that [would] spell out a clear social contract between government and citizens.” While there is currently a transitional constitution in place, the report notes that, owing to the opaque and controversial nature of its preparation and promulgation, it has not received universal mandate from the citizens. Hence, it has failed to act as a unifying symbol that all South Sudanese could be proud of.

But above all, the main stumbling block to a long lasting peace and unity is ethnic strife and rivalries. For instance, the author informs us that “ethnic relations in the city of Juba have been extremely volatile due to accusations that the Dinka, South Sudan’s largest ethnic group, have dominated the government.” This is couple with the unflattering “claims of violence by Nuer and Dinka–dominated army personnel; and suspicions of land grabbing by people who are not indigenous residents of the town.”

Because this “widespread suspicion of ethnicity-based exclusion from the national platform and other aspects of South Sudanese national life” do come “with tragic consequences for national unity, human life, and development programs,” the main problem facing policy makers in Juba, the report observes, is “the question of whether the historical experiences—a negative unity driven by opposition to the north—that have long united the old south will endure in the new south, enabling the young country to become a unified political, cultural, and social entity—in short, a nation.”

In addition to internal problems cited above, the report identifies “activities of the Khartoum government on the borders” especially those that fuel and sustain “local militias, rebel movements, and tribal warfare” within South Sudan’s borders. The fighting in the regions of Abyei, Blue Nile and Nuba Mountain is also threatening to draw in the Republic of South Sudan, particularly the oil-producing regions where security is paramount for the economic viability of the new state.

What is the outcome of these combined forces? The disillusionment from within and the fear from without, the report asserts, have produced disunited and tribalized citizens in the Republic of South Sudan. While there was no question that most South Sudanese had “remained focused on the need for unity of purpose and ranks [during] their struggle for self-determination,” after independence though, “the country has found itself with only a hazy notion of a collective national identity beyond its unified opposition to the north, making its viability as a nation a matter of speculation.”

Ironically, the report implies that the continued menacing threat from the north might be what is keeping the South from implosion. (Although of a different nature, it does sound like a unity by force that was rejected during the referendum.) Interestingly, to the outsiders, South Sudan appears to have been “driven more by the euphoria of independence from Sudan, the political pronouncements of its leadership, and the history of an extremely violent conflict with the north than by its practical abilities as a nation-state.”

So what should be done to avert the seemingly impending disintegration of South Sudan along ethnic line? The report stresses that a “country seeking unity, collective national identity, and stability must have a clear policy.” According to the report, South Sudan’s government should “envisions the new nation as standing on four pillars needed to hold up the country: political unity, a strong and disciplined military, a strong economy and services delivery, and a vibrant civil society.”

Political unity is feasible through concerted political cultivation and construction of South Sudanese collective identity out of the present conflict-ridden cultural diversity. And “it is the task of [the] leadership, government, civil society, and private enterprise to do it by turning South Sudan’s cultural diversity into a national asset.”

The report correctly concludes that “the most obvious impediment to national cohesion is exclusion from the national platform, especially exclusion along ethnic lines” which regrettably precludes South Sudanese from having “pride in their nation.” Therefore, the author emphasizes, for those South Sudanese leaders who are preoccupied with how to turn South Sudan ethnic and cultural diversity into a useful national asset, fair “representation of all ethnic nationalities and creation of a broad-based government is central to South Sudan’s transition to nationhood.”

One more promising factor, among others in the report, is that the recognition that national education, a disciplined national army, a national anthem and flag and the celebration of “the country’s diverse culture through cultural centers, museums of heritage, and national archives” would act as “unifying symbols in the face of [divisive] ethnic and cultural diversity” in South Sudan.

Of course, not everyone will gladly welcome the report without faulting it. One main criticism obviously would be the usual claim that these types of “special reports” are nothing more than academic papers produce and consume by academicians and the organization[s] that funds them. Critics would maintain that as the academicians and their sponsors marvel over this latest special report on South Sudan, ethnic divisions and fighting would go on unabated.

Mainly, this is because the work might never get accessible to the relevant people—those that are actually involved either in the fighting or in the decision to fight. And while the work would indubitably make a great reading among the government ministers in Juba, and South Sudanese intellectuals, it is hard to gauge the extent of its distributions so far, much less its apparent impact, time notwithstanding.

The second criticism would be about the assumed South Sudanese unity during referendum. On the surface, it is easy to conclude that an overwhelming vote for separation was a signature of national unity. Dig underneath enough, however, and you would discover that that “full 98 percent vote in favor of separation, rejecting a unified Sudan” was not about unity of purpose and intents as much as it was about scoring points against one another and political face-saving by others.

That is, the SPLM/A, having lost the New Sudan Vision on the plane that killed Dr. John Garang, had no alternative but to settled for separation while the non-SPLM/A members—especially the militia groups who fought alongside the north—voted for separation, in spite of their marriage to the north, to score points against the SPLM/A. Contrary to the report, it is arguable to say that South Sudanese were never united in the past, not during the war, and of course, not now in the new nation.

In spite of these criticisms, the report is special in the sense that it was produced by a South Sudanese rather than from another know-it-all, preachy foreigner telling South Sudanese how to put their house in order while she/he has never been inside that house. Much still, Dr. Jok was, till recently, part of the government of South Sudan where he was serving as undersecretary in the government of South Sudan’s Ministry of Culture and Heritage. His research and findings are therefore well informed, timely and relevant to the urgency of negative ethnicity in South Sudan.

But most importantly, the report gives us—South Sudanese—a new insight into and a feasible way out of our national quandary. We did try South-South Dialogue and Presidential Amnesty as a mechanism to bring about long lasting peace and unity among various South Sudanese socio-political players. But it was abused when it became an incentive for rebellions and political prostitutions. In other words, violence and political rebellions were unwittingly subsidized and incentivized, hence more violence—and less peace, unity and order—was reaped, contrary to the initial good intention of the process.

Dr. Jok’s special report, therefore, is the latest take on this protracted pursuit of bringing about genuine peace and unity—molding the new nation from the ashes of war and negative ethnicity by turning South Sudanese cultural diversity into a national asset. I would therefore recommend this report to anyone interested in the welfare of South Sudan as a new nation.

Ultimately, what is needed to achieve peace and unity amidst our diverse ethnicities is a grand vision that would act as a rallying point to mold and create national identity. The kind of unity we yearn for could be glimpsed from the euphoric celebration of South Sudanese on two main occasions: the signing of the CPA and the announcement of the referendum’s results.

Only when we arrived there shall we talk—and be assured—of having achieved a sense of nationhood and oneness. It will definitely take lot of time, effort and/or luck for South Sudanese to relish the “expected dividends of independence” and the fruit of nationhood.

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