

The Fabricated Coup (South Sudan): A Confession from a Party insider

(a) SPLM & DEMOCRACY:

The fate of this young nation is in the hands of two men whose rivalry and distrust goes back to the beginning of SPLM/SPLA. What started out as a political problem is now threatening to take this young nation to the brink of a civil war. Dr. Machar having lost his vice presidential seat realized that his only mean of ascending to power is through the democratization of SPLM. Pres. Kiir, on the other hand, understood that democratization of the party is a threat to his regime. The demands put forward by Dr. Machar and Pagan Amum at the most recent party meeting were aimed at weakening the powers of the presidency. The long term goal was multi-partism and democracy in South Sudan. But Machar, Pagan and their other ten colleagues understood that; forming their own party would be deemed as betrayal by South Sudanese. And they are reluctant to leave a party which they have been participants in building and nurturing. Pres. Kiir demands the same level of reverence and respect that was accorded to the late Dr. John Garang. However, Kiir unlike Garang is not a consensus builder. He tends to be very frustrated by political process while Dr. Garang did not personalized politics, Kiir keeps political grudges and demand complete loyalty. His failure to enforce the appointment of Telar Riing as justice minister made him very skeptical of a democratic SPLM. Afterall, Kiir is a military General who abides by the Military code of conduct.

In short, out of fear of democratic process and Dr. Machar's presidential ambitions, Pres. Kiir has resorted to his last option: amilitary rule. This was why the presidential Guards – a majority of whom are from Kiir's very own subclan-was formed in the first place. The Guards main job was complete loyalty to Pres. Kiir, not to the South Sudan's president or to the Rep. of South Sudan but to Kiir himself. The only reason there were some Nuers and a small numbers from other tribes within the group was due to fear of disintegration within the SPLA. In order to nationalize the army, it was necessary to integrate the military. This was supposed to weaken likely potential rebels. In particular, the late Gen. Matip Nhial, Gen.George Athor, Gatdet Yaak and Tanginye. And also to entice

YauYau, who is still rebelling against South Sudan. The overall objective in forming the presidential Guards, was to ensure Pres. Kiir remains in power by any means necessary. The aim was to ruthlessly silence the democratic voices within the party led by Dr. Machar. It must be noted that Machar was only a de facto leader of the group due to his seniority within the party.

(b) The Plan: a fabricated Military Coup And why a Coup?

A fabricated coup was the only mean of ensuring Pres. Kiir remains in power as a "failed coup" in african context is almost always justified with an establishment of a brutal military regime. The plan was to either arrest/prosecute or assassinate some the 12 politicians. An emphasis of "dead or alive" was placed in Dr. Machar's case. During this upheaval a strict curfew was to be established in juba, malakal and Bor. An immediate order was to be given to govt. Montytil and govt. Kun pouch in unity and Upper Nile to protect the oil fields while re-inforcement arrived.

So what went wrong? For once the dreaded presidential guards being mostly young recruits and given their limited military experience in SPLA were extremely indisciplined in their execution of the presidential orders. A number of them having long held personal grievances against Machar and the Nuer in general for the Bor massacre of 1991, decided to carry out revenge attacks on the Nuer civilians in juba. This gave Machar time to escape. The guards also completely destroyed Dr. Machar's home in juba and there was a speculation in the presidential circles that he might have been killed in the rubble. This meant a couple of hours were wasted trying to find out machar's whereabouts. And before long Gen. Gatdet in Bor had received intelligence about the massacre of Nuer in juba. Gatdet is well known for being a nationalist but a pro-nuer at heart. His objective was always to fight for Nuer first. His support for Machar is a consequence of his loyalty to Nuer and not on shared principles. As a result, Pres. Kiir and his confidants hope that Gatdet- given his new found faith in South Sudan Unity and his elevated status within the party- would take a couple of days before he get a wind of what was actually going on in Juba and make a decision to defect. During this time he would either have been persuaded to stay within the rank

and let the judicial process take place or implicated in the “Coups”. Perhaps, Gatdet’s military experience and distrust of Koul Manyang and Kiir told him otherwise. Another major blow was the defection of Gen. Koang in Unity State- This was never anticipated by the high command. Kiir’s inner circle were generally inept in their execution of this plan. The major mistake was the lack of understanding of Nuer’s sentiments in the SPLA and in the populace. And the desire to deny the Nuers any elevated status within the movement by some of the staunch supporters of Pres. Kiir. There was a fear that the Nuer would coalesce around Machar upon his arrest but that ultimately Gen. Hoth Mai might be in a position to re-establish order if needed.

(c) IGAD/Geopolitics: Kenyatta & Museveni

Once, the high command received the information that Machar had escaped and that Gatdet had defected. Two objectives were put in place:

1. To immediately put down any potential mutiny within Juba. This means the execution and imprisonment of some of the senior members of SPLA who were deemed loyal to Dr. Machar. Particularly, those from Lou Nuer and Bentiu.
2. A call was made to Pres. Museveni and to Pres. Kenyatta for support. Museveni and Machar have a long history of distrust given that Museveni believed Machar “financed” the LRA. A rebel group that created havoc in northern Uganda. And Machar is not very fond of Museveni’s dictatorial tendencies and interference in South Sudan’s politics. Mr. Kenyatta, on the other hand, wants Pipeline through Kenya and Pres. Kiir promised to deliver. Major investment plans have already been put in place to this effect. Kenya would immensely benefit from the pipeline. Machar was reluctant about the cost of building such a pipeline and believed that Kenya will hold South Sudan hostage once the pipeline has been built. Kiir would rather see a pipeline through Kenya as he didn’t trust Bashir regime. Ethiopia was not contacted until guarantees had been made by Mr. Kenyatta and Mr. Museveni. Once support was established Mr. Kenyatta was used to woo Ethiopia’s prime minister. Note that Ethiopia is generally seen as sympathetic to Machar as there is a large population of Nuers in Ethiopia. In

fact, a whole sub-clan of Nuer (Gaajak) live in Ethiopia. Furthermore, Kenyatta having been a beneficiary of tribal politics and a victim of Mr. Odinga's political maneuvers, understood Pres. Kiir's sentiments on Dr. Machar's presidential ambitions. Note that Kenyatta was very supportive of Moi's anti-multipartism in the early 1990s. He was a product of KANU- a party very much like South Sudan's SPLM- and a beneficiary of one party rule and tribal politics. The results of the two recent elections in Kenya provide a strong evidence of tribal politics and Uhuru's desire to transcend such politics. A goal he ultimately failed. He has been accused of instigating tribal violence that killed upto 1500 people and displaced more than 25,000 civilians. Kenyatta's case was recently dropped due to "insufficient" evidence. However, Kenyatta's reputation is still tarnished and the West does not trust him. Any positive efforts in helping solve South Sudan's crisis would be welcomed by the West. There is also Chinese economic interest in East Africa and there is fear that Kenyatta's effort might not be genuine. He is likely to be on the side of the Chinese/Khartoum.

Once this two objectives had been achieved. The next goal was to convinced the international community and in particular the US government that indeed Dr. Machar carried out a coup. The problem however, was persuading Susan Rice and John Kerry to this fact. Dr. Rice having interacted with both Pres. Kiir and Dr. Machar was very skeptical. She does not believe it was in the best interest of Machar to carry out a coup. How was he going to do so without an army at his disposal? Why would he carry out a coup given that he was winning the political battle within the party? And why would Machar wants to use his tribe to face the army of South Sudan given the painful memories of 1991 and his current support from some Dinka leaders? And who would finance him given China and Sudan had made a deal with GOSS? There were too many unanswered questions. The US government did not buy into the coup allegations. The explanation given by Dr. Adwok, that there was an infighting in the presidential Guards, was deemed more plausible.

(d) MILITARY INTERVENTION IN BOR:

The next step was to re-take Bor from Gen. Gatdet. Pres. Kiir then gave UPDF- Uganda's military- the permission to bomb Gatdet's strategic position in Bor. Machar did not want a repeat of 1991 and asked Gatdet to pull out. The truth is there was no "re-take of Bor" by the GOSS troops. Gatdet had already pulled out some hours before the government troops arrived in Bor. The skirmishes in Bor were from a small group left behind by Gatdet as a decoy. This allowed him to escape. But not before he made a major mistake in mistaking US aircraft for UPDF Planes. This was both unfortunate and very costly to Machar's effort in persuading the US of his non-participation in the alleged coup.

(e) The Strategic Statement: is Machar Cornered?

Right now, the objective is to re-take the oilfields and to counter any move Machar is likely to make. Pres. Kiir has succeeded so far in winning IGAD to his side. Machar is left with Khartoum and some oil fields. Machar's demands on the surface seem basic and reasonable but in the bigger scheme of politics; they constitute a great threat to Kiir's objective of a military rule. Machar wants the detainees to be released. He wants Pagan Amum – a nationalist and a shrewd negotiator- on his side. Pres. Kiir would be foolish in releasing Mr. Amum. And he has used Pagan's past alleged corruption charges to keep him under arrest. Machar also wants a "credible ceasefire" to be negotiated. This would give him enough time to re-established his contacts and re-group with his detained colleagues giving them an equal status on the negotiating table and taking Kiir's a long step-on

Any form of power sharing would mean Machar would achieve his objective of democratizing the SPLM. In short, Machar- being the strategist -is thinking three steps ahead. But for Machar's plan to work, he needs some leverage. Currently he has three options: The oilfields in Unity/Upper Nile, The White army and Bashir/Chinese. Given Machar's overall goal – complete independence of South Sudan from the North- the third option would be his desperate and last move. The use of White army would lead to unnecessary

bloodshed in Bor and Akobo. There are some Lou Nuer in Akobo segments who are skeptical of Machar but given John Luk Jok-Akobo's son- is in detention, Machar can persuade the Lou Nuer. And Machar needs both the Bor/twic and Lou Nuer on his side. Creating a war between the two sub-clans would lead to a result very similar to 1991. This would ultimately undermine Dr. Machar's presidential ambition and little support from the international community. Most of his colleagues in detention are mostly Dinkas. He needs to convince the world and the Dinka community that he is not waging a tribal warfare. While he might not be entirely convincing, he would create some doubts within the Dinka community. He needs to be seen as a non-tribalist.

The best option and the most credible move Machar is likely to make is holding Pres. Kiir's government hostage. Machar will in effect attempt to control the oilfields in Upper Nile and Unity. But for him to get financing he needs to be able to re-direct the oil revenues to a bank account he can control. This would mean he must either make a deal with Bashir/Chinese or simply use both the oilfields and a negotiated ceasefire as a "credible threat".

In order for Machar to retain his current control of Unity oil fields; he must control Mayom county and make a direct threat to overtaking Warrap state. He must tempt Pres. Kiir to direct all effort to Warrap state and maintain a hold of Kuajok. This would leave Jonglei vulnerable as the SPLA with its limited resources will be overstretched. Machar will then solidify his control of Akobo and use Bor as a ploy to keep hold of Mayom while being in a good position to negotiate. It should be noted that Machar is a product of the civil war and can be very resourceful. It would be a mistake for Kiir to undermine any proposals he make. Even if these demands seem rather odd. Machar is a shrewd strategist. He will not admit to defeat. The tribal politics of south sudan dictates that both the Dinka and the Nuer be participants, if there is to be any national building. Otherwise, civil war is likely to occur.

(f) What is the best outcome for South Sudan?

The best outcome for the country is for Pres. Kiir to negotiate right away with Dr. machar. Eventually, the SPLA will democratize and

Pres. Kiir can still win election under a democratic South Sudan. He is likely to garner atleast the majority (51%) in any given election. Perhaps, he won't negotiate due to influence from his close confidants (Telar Aring, Hoth Mai, Mr. Makeui Lueth, Mr. Juuk) who have more to lose in a democratic SPLM.

An immediate release of all political detainees (particularly, Mr. Amum and Mr. Alor) is a very unlikely outcome in the short run. The truth is the stalemate is likely to continue until Dr. Machar is in a strong negotiation position. A scenario I don't foresee anytime soon. In so far, as Machar is not in a position to procure external financing, he is unlikely to achieve his short term objectives: a negotiated ceasefire settlement and the release of ALL detainees. If indeed Dr. Machar manage to somehow negotiate for himself a favorable result, it will only speak volume of his strategic capabilities and the loyalty he commands from the Nuer people. As the situation stands, Pres. Kiir is in a winnable position, but a position that could ultimately lead to the very dreaded civil war if he overplay his hand and tempt fate. Makuei and Kol Manyang are currently persuading him in that direction. This would be an ill-advised move, as it would simply prolong the stalemate and led to civil war.

After many decades of warfare, 2014 should be a year of re-unification for South Sudanese. It's upon the two leaders to put aside their differences for the sake of national interest. Politics must stop at the water's edge.