

“The Meaning of 7 October”
By Diing Deng Mou

Exactly five years ago, I took part in the revolt inside the Blue House prison that became the inspiration for the 7 October Movement.

A group of us imprisoned inside the Blue House came to trust each other very deeply. We knew our incarcerations were unjust, and we knew that we faced the clear and present danger that any one of us could be abducted, killed, and disappeared. It had already happened many times to other inmates in the Blue House at the hands of National Security.

We carefully observed their methods of abduction. The same team that carried out abductions in the past had been sent in to prepare the ground. A new round was imminent. So in the early hours of Sunday, 7 October 2018, we decided to resist the attempt. We broke from our cells, disarmed the guards, and took what weapons we could find in the armory, most having no bullets at all. But we did not try to flee the prison, nor did we ever discharge the weapons. We had only a simple objective, to raise our silenced voices and call for justice.

We informed the government of our position. We protected the other inmates and established rules of engagement. We then reached out to international media to call attention to our plight. We demanded justice and the rule of law in South Sudan. Though weapons were fired at our direction from forces outside the facility, we never once returned fire and we insisted on a mediated resolution to the standoff. When the leader of our group gave the call to lay down the arms, we willingly did so and peacefully returned to our cells. Our leader was Kerbino Wol.

Some of us, including myself, were released in the coming weeks. Some like those of Kerbino were kept in their cells to be isolated and starved. They were eventually given a sham of a trial and sentenced for participating in the revolt. They were never charged for any crime having anything to do with their original arrests. Still, they carried dignity into the courtroom, followed judicial procedures, and proclaimed themselves to be good citizens.

After twenty months in confinement, Kerbino Wol and the men of 7 October were released by presidential decree in January 2020. Six months later, Kerbino Wol publicly declared his intention to organize a pro-democracy movement to oppose the government. Kerbino Wol named the movement after the date when myself and others joined him in solidarity to challenge the repressive prison system.

When Kerbino Wol announced the 7 October Movement, he made a greeting to his fellow citizens of all communities and tribes in the country. He stated his wish to stand in solidarity alongside young people who struggle to liberate themselves from repression. We were no battalion, just a small group of former soldiers and prisoners. Within days Kerbino was tracked and killed. He and several of our members were disappeared and their families were denied a proper burial. Their bodies were desecrated in the most evil ways. I was one of few that managed to escape.

Today we are out once again to remember and share the commemoration of the day when the prisoners who had been unlawfully detained inside the Blue House took command of the prison. We pay our respects to the souls of our comrades who perished for pursuing their ideals with discipline and integrity.

It must be remembered that we the men who formed the 7 October Movement were trained soldiers that came up in a system that taught us to think of weapons first. Kerbino Wol himself was mobilised as a child in the Red Army. Violence was used to shape our perspective as soldiers and to instill a hierarchy of obedience inside the military.

Violence has continued to shape the reality of South Sudan as our people know it today in their daily lives. This pattern continued beyond our independence, as we found our country moving through civil wars and deprivation, never celebrating the optimism of that day in 2011 that we were told would be our liberation.

Under the current leadership of South Sudan, the military model continues to dominate the nation. The system is still producing so many warlords. The youth is still gathered to be mobilised for violent acts. Loyalty is assured through ethnic links within the command structure. This is what drags young men to commit atrocities against their own people, when they follow orders while knowing nothing better. Those who become commanders turn the next generation to a similar process of violence, repeating the cycle. A code of silence is maintained so that dissenting voices are not heard.

Many people take this as the way things should be done, it is as part of our life and part of our culture. But good citizens like Kerbino Wol hoped to point a different way forward at the greatest risks and sacrifice. The good citizen accepts to sit in the courtroom because we respect laws and justice. The good citizen wants whatever charge brought against us to be adjudicated by the rule of law. It is lawlessness that no one can accept, to sit in prison or to be preyed upon simply because someone is more powerful than you. When confronted with lawlessness it is necessary for the good citizens to confront the lawless system and make the call for justice.

In my life, no one has inspired me more to the possibilities of changing our mindsets than my late brother Kerbino Wol. Though his body was destroyed he himself cannot be touched or erased. Kerbino was like a rock in the water. What he did was to stand apart, to offer a model of change, and to create a momentum. Kerbino took the good faith to participate in his country's institutions as a businessman and philanthropist. He maintained his integrity when he called out the injustice of the lawless system. His life and vision were based on humble service to his country and people.

On 7 October, and including his last days, Kerbino does not go out seeking revenge. He is not trying to open fire with one final bullet. It is one thing for a soldier to reach for guns based on his training and instincts. It is quite another thing for a soldier to lay the guns down, against every fiber of his training and being. Kerbino led a demonstration of how to lay the weapons down, even when all defenses are lost. These are the pivotal moments he offered at the cost of

his life. These are the difficult and tragic choices of a genuine leader that create pathways for change.

The 7 October Movement is a nonviolent movement of South Sudanese citizens. We are only a small movement, but we can keep the momentum going. Kerbino Wol showed us how to follow a vision of solidarity, how to look across tribe and ethnicity, and how to look outside the prevailing culture centered on violence. This is why the 7 October Movement has made a commitment to nonviolence as a core fundamental value. This commitment is not made because we are forgetting the harm done to us. It is not to suggest that past damages should not be addressed or to accept injustice. Rather it is a commitment to demonstrate how a broken community can heal itself, and to show that change has to start with ourselves.

There is a whole generation that only believes in using violence and force to express their grievances. People are accustomed to looking for guns as the quickest and most rational solution. This is what many people have in their mindset, that I should not die without having killed someone too, so there is a revenge and I am not on the losing side.

Our people know that the regime they are dealing with knows nothing apart from weapons and violence. The government ministers state the threat outright, for example that when dealing with protests they do not have rubber bullets or water cannons, only live rounds. That is why people are skeptical of using other means of problem-solving. It is hard to use peaceful methods when you know you will be confronted with killing and violence.

But one cannot call for democracy and the rule of law if one is feeding into the lawlessness. If you challenge the regime with weapons, you are playing their game and playing on their field. We see it in Juba and we see it in Khartoum today, they have all the weapons they need. They cannot be beaten at their game. So we should not dance to their tune or play on their field.

The biggest challenge for peaceful activists is convincing people to adopt the nonviolent approach, and giving them confidence that something is going to be achieved. But the nonviolent approach is made stronger when good citizens work together and build solidarity networks that help to defend our communities.

There are networks of activists that work in small groups across the country, the region, and across the larger global society. We share our personal stories and we share stories of repression and intimidation. We share stories of prison, torture, and killings. We share stories of the escape to exile and the loss of families. We share our mistakes and the struggles of our decision-making, because activists only face difficult choices. We work like a family, so there is that tie between us, we are always ready to help each other.

When one is talking in their part of the world, the voice cannot always reach the citizens of their country due to censorship. But when activists come together in global solidarity networks to share stories and ideas, small groups are made larger and our voices become more powerful. When we build bonds across continents we gain hope that we can build stronger bonds within

our communities, despite the many difficulties involved. There is hope, there is a lot of hope, because this solidarity will strengthen our commitment and elevate our voices.

In South Sudan, if there is to be any joining together of citizens for positive change, it must be under a nonviolent umbrella. Any taking up of arms will revert to the command structure of the tribes. This is also common to the groups that have formed the traditional opposition in South Sudan, but are also maintaining the traditional hierarchies. Without a South Sudanese identity to bring our communities together and break across the tribal and regional differences, we will remain to doubt ourselves, and there is nothing we can do in common.

This makes the question of national elections of critical importance. Elections are essential peaceful processes to express the will of the people when they permit free space to every political party to campaign and are monitored by independent institutions. However, if elections are organized by one party in power to consolidate the authority and existing leadership of that party, then there are causes for skepticism and dismay.

Still, elections must always be tested with active participation, even when the structure of the government makes it impossible that an impartial national election can be held. Just as Kerbino Wol walked into that courtroom as a good citizen with all the forces arrayed against him, nonviolent activism requires courage and hard work, including many sacrifices. It is not easy to take risks for the common good. But with solidarity and awareness all South Sudanese can be vigilant activists for law and accountability, and call out injustice when we see it. The civic activity of a national election process, even a flawed one, is not an end. It is a beginning.

The 7 October Movement is a nonviolent movement for those who wish to work in common cause with other nonviolent citizen groups and promote a spirit of solidarity. If we can contribute to build a civic community that can confront injustices and solve problems with civic activities, it would be a modest and lasting tribute to our fallen brothers.

When we resolved to defend ourselves inside the Blue House on 7 October, the important thing was not any weapon. The important thing was the solidarity. This was a solidarity different from anything we found in the security forces. Having that unity of cause made something like a few committed men into a major group.

Maybe if we did not do what we did, some of us would have been abducted, lynched, and driven to our graves on that very 7 October day. But with the simple act of standing together, we managed to stop that, if only for a short time. This is what sustained our feeling that if at some point we are on the outside we are going to keep that solidarity going. That was our wish.

We managed to send a message to the men and women of our country that mindsets can be changed and South Sudanese can stand together in the harshest of circumstances. We tried this and it worked. This is the meaning of 7 October.