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Kisiangani Emmanuel
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South Sudan and the pitfalls of power
Lessons from Africa’s past

Kisiangani Emmanuel

For the people of South Sudan, the promise of independence is saddled with challenges similar to those witnessed by post-independence Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Then, the euphoria was short lived as several African countries lapsed into a state of authoritarianism, corruption and instability. The question is, what went wrong and can South Sudan learn from Africa’s past? This update observes that there are differences in context between South Sudan and post-independence Africa, but maintains that South Sudan faces similar dangers: independence could easily turn into disenchantment and come to haunt the leaders of Africa’s newest state should they fail to take concrete measures to transform institutions to be accountable, inclusive and responsive to people’s needs.

Keywords Independence, celebrations, pitfalls, participatory processes

Introduction

As the euphoria of celebration settles down in Juba, the question is, will Africa’s newest state learn from the mistakes of the continent’s post-colonial past or will it repeat them? As George Santayana remarked: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

The people of South Sudan are upbeat – and rightly so – after witnessing the single most defining moment in their lives, the independence of South Sudan. The festivities witnessed singing and dancing in the streets of Juba and partying in other parts of the world, similar to the excitement and jubilation that greeted Sudan’s march towards independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Then, like now in South Sudan, there was no doubt in the minds of many that the new era would herald prosperity and hard-sought political freedoms.
Several years down the line the hopes of African independence and its dividends began dissipating as political experiments unravelled structural problems and degenerated into colonial-style, exclusionary autocracies oiled by corruption and patronage. Even Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, hailed by many as a genuine African hero because of his zealous pursuit of Pan-African ideals, wasted little time to introduce measures that concentrated absolute power in his hands. Africa’s liberators turned into oppressors, prompting Kenya’s doyen of opposition politics, the late Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, to remark cynically that it was ‘not yet uhuru’ (not yet independence) referring to political stagnation in Kenya and across the continent.

Will Africa’s newest state do better? Will it move forward as a united country or will it suffer the same perils of abuse and misuse of power as many other post-independence African states? South Sudan has become independent under different local and international circumstances, but the signs are there that it is not immune to Africa’s past perils.

The aim of this update is to highlight some of the apparent political dangers in South Sudan and underscore the need for transformative and inclusive processes that can lead to a society that is participatory and equitable, and where all citizens are treated fairly and have a chance to fulfill their potential.

**Contextualising the challenge**

South Sudan’s independence, just like Africa’s post-colonial experience, has raised questions about the dream of self-rule. Will the country’s leaders embrace the democratic principles they were fighting for, or will they practise the very same things that they were fighting against? So far, South Sudan has been developing its own institutions; it has its own parliament, judiciary and government, with all the trappings of a legal regime. Opposition politics has also taken root in the new country, although the dominance of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) in government and Parliament means that opposition parties remain largely weak and ineffective. Nonetheless, state-building reform initiatives such as establishing and putting into operation a new system of government and public administration for all of South Sudan are certainly commendable.

What is disconcerting, however, is the way the SPLM is increasingly appearing to centralise power. For instance, the manner in which it forced through constitutional changes made some political and social observers believe that the ruling party was not serious about the consolidation of democracy in South Sudan. Moreover, it is worrying that there are some rather disturbing authoritarian tendencies in South Sudan’s interim constitution. Among other unchecked powers, the president has the power to unilaterally sack governors and state representatives and declare a state of emergency.

Saddled with the legacy of the liberation struggle the SPLM – like many other African liberation movements who used undemocratic and often authoritarian methods to fight for freedom – retains that militarised culture and a sense of entitlement. Its virtual domination of institutions of government makes it difficult to separate the SPLM from the government of South Sudan. The SPLM already holds nine of the ten state governorships in South Sudan and therefore controls most bureaucracies at county level. Left to itself, the SPLM – like most political parties – has neither the incentive to share power with other parties nor the motivation to accelerate democratisation. Having acquired power through the barrel of a gun, some former insurgents have come to regard power as theirs by right. This has led to frustration among members at grassroots level about the party’s participatory nature and responsiveness.
to their needs. There are indeed concerns about the South Sudanese government’s real commitment to structural transformation and consolidation of democracy. There are also worrying reports of high levels of corruption, and with the SPLM holding more than 90 per cent of parliamentary seats, the danger is that it could easily entrench itself and lose touch with ordinary citizens. The rest of Africa saw a similar trend where leaders with excessive power ended up surrounding themselves with court poets and sycophants, wheeler-dealers, and influence peddlers. Their friends were appointed to top positions in government and ended up viewing their positions as a license to loot the state coffers.

It is feared that in South Sudan things are already starting to unravel, with some government officials embarking on economic mismanagement and lavish spending on grandiose ventures that put state resources at risk. Many people outside Juba believe that South Sudan already appears to be practising what it fought against. They feel that those in government in Juba have been benefiting from ‘oil dollars’, while the rest of the country remains underdeveloped.

The SPLM cannot afford to act like its predecessors. Elsewhere in post-independence Africa where leaders turned their countries into one-party states and indulged in a sleazy cult of personality, it did not take long for resentment to surface. Given the fragile situation in South Sudan, the danger is that the ‘political kingdom’ might crumble if the perception develops that people’s needs are not addressed by going through the usual and legal political channels. On a positive note, however, the President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, has reportedly embarked on a decentralisation process in order to take ‘the town to the people and not people to the town’. Time will tell whether he will be successful.

There are subtle differences between the South Sudan context and other post-independence African countries, however. The latter operated in an international environment that was to a large extent affected by the Cold War. There was limited external scrutiny, unlike in the present international environment. South Sudan could therefore actually benefit from a changed environment that demands transparency and accountability rather than indulging countries on the basis of their ideological alignments. Moreover, South Sudan, unlike most other African countries after independence, is not starting from scratch. For the past six years the government of South Sudan has enjoyed considerable autonomy with an elected assembly and government and a functioning judicial system.

On the whole, however, the leaders of South Sudan find themselves confronted with the challenge of ensuring the integrity of the new state. Perceptions around corruption, centralisation of power, marginalisation of regions on the periphery and ethnic divisions – among others – threaten the anticipations of those who were out celebrating independence on 9 July. In the rest of Africa, characteristically most post-independence problems have been blamed on the combined legacy of colonisation and neo-colonialism. South Sudan, with all its resources, may find fewer similar excuses now that it is independent from the North. The question is what went wrong in other African countries and whether the South Sudanese leaders can do things differently.

**Locating the problem**

The situation in some African countries today is perceived to be as bad as, if not worse than, under colonial subjugation. The question is, if post-independence leaders in countries like Botswana did manage to improve the lives of their people, how come the euphoria in others was short lived?
There is no doubt that Africa’s ruling elites have been the greatest beneficiaries of the political and economic misfortune of their respective nations. Some of the main causes of Africa’s post-independence problems have been: weak institutions, authoritarian rule, corruption, insufficient respect for human rights, lack of good governance, and the perception that administrative and political channels are inadequate or unresponsive to people’s needs. As long as there are no checks and balances in place, predatory African political rulers and administrators will continue to pursue their own selfish ends.

The challenge facing South Sudan, therefore, is how to make those in power accountable to the people. Frederick Golooba-Mutebi rightly observes that there is a great difference between being oppressed by those perceived as foreigners who would have acquired power without your consent, and suffering misrule by your own ‘brothers and sisters’ who have come to power with your consent. He continues:

What makes the latter especially painful is that you had been made to believe that, once they took over the government, they would treat you with decency, respect, and consideration, and that they would neither deprive you of your rights nor even steal from you.4

Post-independence Africa reminds us how easily a liberation movement can become an oppressor. The bottom line, therefore, is about building credible, inclusive and participatory institutions where all citizens have an equal chance to fulfill their potential. This is particularly important for South Sudan, a country of more than 200 ethnic groups – some of which have an acrimonious past owing to feuds over grazing land, cattle rustling, and tribal raiding. Its leaders need to seriously resist the policy of divide and rule used against them by the British and Khartoum. Should a section of the South elect to use ethnicity as a tool for political advancement, this will entrench the politics of tribalism and re-activate ancient South-South conflicts. Ultimately, fair and inclusive participation are the keywords in resolving most of South Sudan’s (and Sudan’s) conflicts. The country may have the potential to realise the dividends of independence, but if it fails to learn from the experiences of other African countries and from its own mistakes, it may have to deal with the very situation it was fighting against.

**Conclusion**

A South Sudan in transition will face various challenges, but these are not insurmountable. Good political will, active internal dialogue, and a commitment to the ideals of democracy and good governance are, however, prerequisites. All citizens must be involved in decision-making through full participation and a respect for plurality that leaves no place for marginalisation. Unfortunately not enough is being done to rectify past mistakes and little initiative is being taken to bring about meaningful national dialogue in search of peace and stability.

One of the main tasks of the new government should be to open up the political space – both among political parties and within the SPLM itself. Meaningful participation of other political forces in government processes could help avoid confrontation between the various parties, saddled as they are with the legacy of a long war. The issue of marginalisation has been a problem in Sudan for decades, and there is a real danger that the South would fall prey to this old practice.

The leaders of South Sudan need to realise that it is a ‘self-help’ world and that they should not wait for external miracles. To create a future, the people of South Sudan must forge it
themselves. The litmus test for the viability of South Sudan lies in its efforts to transform governance structures to become more inclusive and responsible to people’s needs. If this does not happen, the entire transition process will be undermined. Civil society groups also need to pay attention to the various threats to the consolidating of democracy by streamlining their collective monitoring and oversight efforts. As regards the position of the international community, a fragile South Sudan calls for robust engagement in order to lead the country towards democratic consolidation.

Notes

4 Ibid.