



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Africa Programme Summary

Division and Conflict in South Sudan: Domestic Politics and Key Actors

Speakers: Dr Annette Weber

Head of Research, Middle East and Africa Division, SWP

Peter Biar Ajak

PhD Candidate, Cambridge University; Director, Centre for Strategic Analyses and Research (C-SAR), South Sudan

Chair: Jason Mosley

Associate Fellow, Africa Programme, Chatham House

31 January 2014

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of a meeting and Q&A session held at Chatham House on 31 January 2014 which focused on the impact that domestic politics and key actors have on the current conflict in South Sudan.

The political crisis in South Sudan that erupted in December 2013 has already claimed thousands of casualties and caused half a million people to be displaced.

The meeting and the Q&A session were held on the record and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

For more information – including recordings, transcripts, summaries, and further resources on this and other related topics – visit www.chathamhouse.org/research/africa.

PETER BIAR AJAK

Mr Ajak stated that the speed with which the tragedy in South Sudan has unfolded has surprised a lot of people. It is difficult to determine the real causes but it is important to consider the historical background in order to see which factors are likely to be associated with recent events in the country.

Throughout its history, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has always had institutional problems. At its inception, the SPLA had a very rigid military hierarchy composed of five key members known as the Politico-Military High Command: Dr John Garang, Chairman and Commander-in-Chief; Kerubino Kuanyin, Deputy Chairman and Deputy Commander-in-Chief; William Nyuon, Chief of General Staff of the SPLM; Salva Kiir, Deputy Chief of Staff; and Nyachigag Nyachiluk, appointed alternate Member of the Politico-Military High Command. This group, formed in 1986, expanded but never convened until around the time the split within the SPLM occurred.

In the 1990s, the leadership division of the military hierarchy was known as the Provisional Executive Committee. They made all the decisions that were pertinent to the movement. Early on, particularly towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, there was a lot of discussion among the leadership of the SPLA about moves towards implementing a consensus decision-making policy within the senior leadership.

Even prior to the split, rivalries have always existed in the SPLA/M and some of the senior leadership in the movement wanted to take over power. The crisis began when Kerubino tried to overthrow Dr Garang. Kerubino was arrested before he could make an attempt, and Nyuon was promoted up the ranks. In 1991 a massive split occurred in which Riek Machar and Lam Akol, former high-ranking members of the SPLA, led a breakaway faction. In 1992, Nyuon, who had since become Garang's deputy, left the movement.

Mr Ajak stated that throughout the history of the SPLM, there has always been discord. In 1994, the movement discussed how to expand institutions and ways to govern the liberated areas in Southern Sudan. At the 1994 convention, on paper there was a real split between the SPLA and SPLM and also over the plan to create the new civil administration of a future South Sudan. In practice, however, some of these things did not take place in time. However, the SPLA/M continued as a liberation movement, with a military wing and a political wing, until the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005.

During this period, while Kiir was Garang's deputy, a group of rising officers was improving capacity on the battlefields and in foreign missions and

becoming increasingly close to Garang. These officers became more involved with the running of the SPLA/M on a daily basis. As a result, Kiir began to feel marginalized by Garang in terms of SPLA/M decision-making. In 2004, rumours that Kiir would be removed and replaced almost derailed the process of the CPA. The crisis almost caused a split between Kiir and Garang. This set the scene for the group of young officers, after the death of Garang, to be seen as potential rivals for Kiir.

Mr Ajak noted that the problems of institutions were never really dealt with while the SPLA was still a guerrilla movement. At the signing of the CPA, the SPLA and SPLM were supposed to transform into three vital institutions. The SPLM was to be a political party, and was seen as very important for implementing the country's vision of democracy and secularism in a united South Sudan. The second institution was to be the government of South Sudan, which would run the autonomous region, and the third institution was to be the SPLA, which would be a professional military body.

The problem began during this transition period, which did not happen as intended. When Garang died, Kiir came to power and was surrounded by separatists who were sceptical of the new vision of the new Sudan. He therefore did not place a priority on investing much effort on the transformation of the SPLM. So the leadership shifted its focus into the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GOSS) and the SPLA. GOSS was seen as fundamental to the independence of South Sudan, while SPLA was seen as a guarantor of the referendum.

The transformation of these two institutions also did not take place as intended. Just before the SPLM was to become the government, the civil service operating in the liberated areas was largely controlled by the group known as the 'Garang boys', and upon his death, there was significant struggle between Kiir and this group. Instead of the civil administration of the new Sudan being used as the core to build the government of South Sudan, the civil service in the regional government of South Sudan was used as the base and the civil administration was incorporated into this system. It was basically a way of balancing power and, for Kiir, a way to exert his authority in GOSS. There was a lot of nepotism in civil service recruitment and GOSS has never really performed as a government; it has not been able to deliver services to its people, nor has it managed to exert political authority over the territory it is supposed to control. At the same time, the GOSS has been accused of corruption. Today, as president of South Sudan, Kiir himself has accused his own government of corruption, leading to the dismissal of the entire cabinet in July 2013. A recent evaluation he conducted found that over

70 per cent of civil servants were not qualified for their position, with a large number also lacking basic arithmetic and English-language skills.

The SPLA also was not transformed as intended. Before his death, Garang retired a large number of senior cadres from the SPLA, leaving Oyai Deng Ajak, who is one of the four still being held under a coup accusation, as the most senior military commander. He therefore became the chief of staff.

When Garang died, Kiir retained the same system, but a power struggle continued behind the scenes. Six years after the Juba Declaration, the SPLA is still plagued by problems of integration and the reintegration of militias, and this has ended up reinforcing the power of the warlords and strongmen in the army.

According to Mr Ajak, the failure of these transformations, along with disquiet among the population, led to soul-searching among the leadership. The combination of weak institutions with the personal ambitions of the actors involved meant that the whole structure was unable to hold. These events have led to the recent crisis, particularly since Kiir has decided to act more within the political bureau. But his loss of control of the bureau meant that it ceased to function effectively.

More recently, when Kiir had begun to ignore the political bureau and used his mechanical majority (due to the lack of any opposition parties within government) within the National Liberation Council to pass the constitution of the SPLM, this was seen by many as a way of allowing intimidation and entrenching his leadership. At a press conference on 6 November, senior members within the SPLM spoke out against the direction the country was taking. The president's response on 8 December took a more confrontational tone. He used his mechanical majority to pass a constitution containing three contentious issues: how the voting was to be done (a show of hands, which the president favoured, or a secret ballot, which the others favoured); whether the senior leadership of the political bureau would be elected or appointed (the president preferred appointment); and whether the deputies and the secretary-general would be appointed or elected (with Kiir again preferring appointment).

Mr Ajak noted that when the president used his mechanical majority to get his way on all counts, the SPLM faction walked out of the meeting. A few hours later, violence erupted in Juba. Because the institutions of security, governance and politics were not robust enough, rhetoric surrounding the conflict took on an ethnic tone – the easiest way to politically mobilize people in the absence of such institutions.

DR ANNETTE WEBER

Dr Weber said it was important to note that the two different assumptions – a binary situation that can be contained in the country itself or a more fragmented set of political actors mobilizing forces – have different implications, not only for potential solutions but also for potential regional dynamics.

She said that it was not yet possible to observe the implications of the crisis in South Sudan on the region, but important to bear these two solutions in mind. There did appear to be more of a fragmentation of different political interest groups turning to violent methods to develop their own mechanisms and dynamics in the region, as opposed to being bound by political power-sharing agreements.

Dr Weber saw two events that occurred at the beginning of the crisis as critical. The first was the very rapid reaction of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), something which had not been seen before. IGAD had a clear understanding that a political negotiation has to come first and foremost. The head negotiators and heads of states went to Juba very quickly and focused as the body of IGAD on political negotiations, seeking a cessation of hostilities as the first phase. As such, Dr Weber said it was very important to understand that some of the IGAD member states do seem to have more of a regional power understanding rather than just pursuing their national interests.

The second development focuses on the two main regional powers, Ethiopia and Uganda, and the different routes that they are taking. Uganda is playing a robust militarized role in the region; it is strongly involved in all African Union missions. Ethiopia is becoming a much more political power broker. Previously Ethiopia's actions had reflected its own interests in the stability of their own territory, previously using IGAD to ward off Eritrea. In the South Sudan case, Ethiopia has involved itself in a much more political dynamic. Uganda and Ethiopia are therefore developing their profiles as regional powers rather than just regional states trying to secure their national interest.

In terms of Sudan's interest and involvement, it was interesting to note that the delegation that came with President Bashir to Juba, very early on in the crisis, was a very massive and robust delegation. It was a clear sign that Sudan has an interest in a stable southern neighbour, primarily owing to the importance of the oil industry. However, Khartoum is benefiting from the current developments in terms of SPLA troop relocation from the border areas to the south. This makes it much easier for President Omar al-Bashir of

Sudan to take the offensive in southern Kordofan State and southern Blue Nile State producing a beneficial effect for Sudan.

If one considers Darfur as part of the regional conflict cluster equation and connects the situation there with what is happening in the Central African Republic (CAR), which many Séléka fighters are leaving, it is apparent that Chad is not embracing them. The question then is where these rebel fighters end up. There exists a potential new development in regional conflict clusters in the future, therefore, especially since Séléka is still on the move.

Dr Weber stated that the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) will always play a role in regional conflict dynamics. The idea of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is another actor. Although the size and influence of the LRA is thought to be much reduced, the discourse of an active 'LRA' is often used by governments in the region to take the blame for problems of their own making.

The defection of SPLA units aligned to Machar mean that the conflict is more likely to spread towards the DRC, CAR and Uganda than to areas around Juba. This is another dynamic that has to be considered.

Uganda has a massive military influence in South Sudan at the moment. Kampala claimed to have its own evacuation plans for the approximately 150,000 Ugandan citizens there, but it was also present for the first operation in Bor with attack helicopters and jets. The operations have the full backing of the Ugandan parliament.

Kenya's stance is not as clearly defined as that of Uganda or Ethiopia, but it is playing much more of a political role. As it is hosting seven of the detainees, it will somehow have to maintain a neutral position in the conflict. Its position is also influenced by the massive investment of Kenyan banks in South Sudan. The oil issue is also an issue for Kenya (as well as Uganda) owing to the Lamu pipeline. This where Kenya's interest lies, and while it initially claimed that it might take military action in South Sudan, it has since distanced itself from the conflict.

Dr Weber concluded that while there has been a cessation of hostilities in South Sudan, fighting has not completely stopped.

SUMMARY OF Q&A

Questions

How should the government of South Sudan approach the issue of relations with post-secession Sudan? Some SPLM/A factions have pushed for regime change in Khartoum, whereas others have advocated working with Sudan.

What about the involvement of non-state actors such as the Justice and Equality Movement?

What is the connection between the LRA, Séléka, al Shabaab and Al-Qaeda? We know Bin Laden was in Sudan until 1996, training people. Is Sudan behind the scene in this crisis?

Dr Annette Weber

On the dynamics of other armed groups in the region, Dr Weber stated that this is certainly of concern to Khartoum but it is not just groups crossing from South Sudan into Sudan that are a problem. It is also the on-going lack of will by the Sudanese government to engage the other armed groups. So the reaction to conflicts and political dissent by the Sudanese government is a military reaction. This is what we are seeing on both sides and the border does not play a big role anymore because the groups can always move. We can see this with different armed groups and it is very likely that some groups that might have been considered to have gone might come back.

On the alliance of jihadi groups, this is what is being described right now by the West and by some regional governments as the 'big threat'. Al Shabaab is not an alliance as such; it is a branding received from Al-Qaeda. There is no commander-in-chief; rather, it is about smaller active units that call themselves al Shabaab- or Al-Qaeda-affiliated. There is no evidence that there is a large corridor of jihadism that reaches into Burundi through the DRC and South Sudan and the CAR. One must also be careful to call Séléka a jihadi group. It is not helpful to bring these issues together. There is certainly a religious aspect but this group has never called for a caliphate or jihad.

Peter Biar Ajak

On the vision of a new Sudan, Mr Ajak noted that there were a number of elites within the SPLM that believed in this vision. But when the SPLM was unable to transform, it was not so much the vision of a new Sudan that became a dividing factor as what the policy towards Sudan should be. This was in the context of negotiations, when many of the negotiators took a much harder line towards Sudan and were unwilling to pay the kind of fees asked by Khartoum. This scenario developed in a very dangerous way, eventually leading to the shutdown of the government. This crippled the economy in South Sudan, with GDP dropping by almost 50 per cent. It also put a lot of pressure on the government in terms of finding revenue to pay salaries. So Salva Kiir wanted to find a workable deal with Khartoum. There was also the question of the SPLM North. Owing to the historical linkages, many believed that it was a moral responsibility of the South to support them where some of the protocols were not implemented.

Questions

What role does the legacy of the SPLM as a Marxist-Leninist organization play, especially in the Rift Valley?

Has the secession of South Sudan added to the instability of the region, including in the Sahel as the message has gone out that armed force can break the original non-secession principle of the African Union?

What three key actions are needed to eradicate or suppress this turmoil?

Comments

Ethiopia played a pivotal role in the signing of the CPA; it is for this reason that it is trying to find a political rather than a military solution to the crisis. Regarding peacekeeping, Addis Ababa has a strong history at both the UN and African Union levels, and is now using IGAD as an instrument to find a political solution for the peace and stability of the region.

The SPLM thrives without structures and institutions in order to promote tribalism. As clearly stated, the SPLA, from its inception, has been a tribal organization. Only one of the five top people under Garang was Nuer; all the rest were Dinka. This was despite the fact that many Nuer could have filled these roles. It is all about one tribe thinking that it can subjugate the rest and control South Sudan.

Peter Biar Ajak

Mr Ajak stated that the history of the SPLM is well known. It was started by a group of officers that conspired over a long period of time to start a movement. Where a movement first starts, that is where support will also originate. The SPLM has done its best to diversify and it has succeeded to a certain extent. Perhaps it did not diversify to the extent that many people would have liked, but it did. So this is not the issue. During the last few years, because institutions have not worked, the way in which appointments have been made has been through different communities lobbying the appointing authorities. This is because the institution of the SPLM has not been functioning. In Africa, the easiest way to mobilize people is through tribalism. As previously mentioned, nepotism is also a problem, particularly in the civil service and the army. Most of the leader's bodyguards will come from his own community. It is not because of the tribe that they belong to; it is because of the association with a particular leader. This is what has happened in Juba. Ethnicity is a feature of the conflict, but it is not the root cause.

There are much uglier moments in the history of South Sudan than the last few weeks. The 1990s were particularly ugly. But the South Sudanese managed to come back together and I have no doubt that this can be achieved. The problem now is finding a leadership that can build institutions and unite the people.

According to Mr Ajak, one of the things that is driving the conflict is the personal ambition of Riek Machar. He sees it as his long-time goal to become the president of South Sudan and he is working towards this. How can this problem be solved? The ambition of Salva Kiir is also important. He is trying to use the system as much as possible to stay in power. These things are very difficult to reconcile. Also, in the last eight years of government, senior officials have sabotaged their colleagues. This is due to the lack of trust that existed. It seems that there will be some kind of power-sharing at the end of the crisis but this will take the situation back eight years to a situation in which people will again be sabotaging each other and institutions will not be built.

Dr Annette Weber

Dr Weber noted that it is not a case of Uganda planning a war on Sudan; Uganda is showing that there is a military solution to a political problem. This is a very serious problem as there is no military solution to that political problem, precisely because it is a power struggle and a lack of structure. This is linked to the question of representation in IGAD. South Sudan's neighbours

are not weak states. They are authoritarian, militarized states, so of course they are ruling IGAD. However, every country in the region wants to be part of this club as a way of being represented. Without a state, a military solution cannot bring stability. A power-sharing agreement with the same people who are responsible for this crisis is not a viable option in the long term. There needs to be a more inclusive, political change.