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Africa Summary

South Sudan's Reshuffle and Reassessment: Towards Democratization and Development?

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20 August 2013

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 20 August 2013. The meeting looked at South Sudan's recent political reshuffle.

Informed by the speakers' extensive experience in South Sudan, this event assessed the recent changes in the government and their implications for the path to elections in 2015. The speakers discussed the dynamics that will shape the country's immediate future and the government's capacity to deliver on pressing internal developmental challenges such as security, the economy and building lasting institutions, as well as tackling corruption, the worsening humanitarian situation and intercommunal clashes.

The meeting consisted of a presentation followed by a discussion, both of which were held on the record. 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.

JAMES COPNALL

James Copnall discussed the decision of South Sudan's President, Salva Kiir, to appoint an entirely new cabinet in July 2013. Mr Copnall gave an immediate history of the power struggles at the centre of the reshuffle, before evaluating the longer-term causes.

Mr Copnall stated that Salva Kiir was usually seen as a cautious politician, having served as a military intelligence officer before the formation of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in 1983. Kiir was known for his 'big tent' strategy, bringing political and military rivals into his inner political circle.

Yet, in an accelerating sequence of events, Kiir took a number of dramatic decisions within a few months that led to the overhaul of the entire South Sudanese government.

In January 2013, Kiir dismissed Lakes state governor Chol Tong Mayay, and appointed Matur Chut as the state's caretaker governor. In June, Kiir suspended the minister of cabinet affairs, Deng Alor, and the finance minister, Kosti Manibe. The president lifted immunity for the two ministers, who were promptly investigated on corruption charges. On 7 July, Kiir sacked a former ally, Unity state governor Taban Deng Gai.

These dismissals paved the way for the events of 23 July. Kiir sacked the vice president, Riek Machar, the secretary general of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), Pagan Amum, and suspended the cabinet. This was possible because South Sudan's constitution awards the president autonomous decision-making powers in many areas.

Mr Copnall discussed the reasons behind Kiir's decision to suspend the cabinet. In doing so, Kiir removed political rivals he believed would not support his bid to remain on as chairman of the SPLM at the next National Convention. Given Kiir's reputation for political caution, his drastic move highlighted the advanced state of the power struggle within the SPLM. Kiir's former allies, Deng Alor and Taban Deng Gai, had appeared to be slipping away from his influence, and private criticism became public when Pagan Amum openly criticized Kiir's decision to sack Alor and Kosti Manibe in June.

Although some ministers were no longer close to Kiir, the dismissal of the cabinet masked the most significant change: the sacking of Riek Machar. At the centre of this political storm was Kiir's growing rivalry with Machar. Tensions that had been brewing over many years came to a head when Machar made it clear he would run for the position of SPLM chairman, and publically criticized the governance of South Sudan and Kiir's leadership.

Mr Copnall gave an overview of the longer-term causes that led to the reshuffle. In 1991 the SPLA split, with Machar leading the breakaway faction. Militarized ethnic conflict ensued, with abuses committed by both sides of the divide. Machar later re-joined the SPLM, but trust in him remained low after the 1991 Bor massacre committed by Machar's SPLM faction. After the formation of the South Sudanese government in 2011, it became clear that Kiir was not prepared to hand power over to Machar under any circumstance.

Mr Copnall stated that Kiir's reshuffle was a risky move. The Salva–Machar split could lead to a militarized divide along Dinka–Nuer lines, although Kiir does not have the support of all the Dinka nor Machar that of all the Nuer.

On the other hand, suspending the entire cabinet at the same time as dismissing Machar was a clever move. Not only was Machar's removal overshadowed, but the reshuffle could be presented as a radical blow against corruption, or as part of a move towards austerity in government. Mr Copnall noted that the new cabinet was made up of 'new old faces' more sympathetic to Kiir's leadership, including Kuol Manyang Juuk as minister of defence and Stephen Dhieu Dau as minister of commerce and industry.

Mr Copnall noted that although there was fear inside and outside South Sudan that those ousted could take up arms, Kiir's decision had so far received a largely democratic response. James Hoth Mai, chief of staff of the SPLA, made it clear the army would back the president, and those who were ousted urged for restraint, calling for democratic struggle instead of military action. Machar accepted the move to be constitutional, although Amum rejected his suspension and filed a petition in the Supreme Court over the president's decision. A parliamentary vetting committee on new ministers was set up, which turned down Kiir's proposal choice of Telar Ring Deng as justice minister.

Mr Copnall asked where these developments leave South Sudan. No replacement vice president has yet been appointed, although names frequently mentioned include prominent Nuers James Hoth Mai, John Luk and Riek Gai. The vacuum of the position of vice president has been magnified, as Machar was more active in the day-to-day governance of South Sudan than Kiir ever was when he occupied the position.

Mr Copnall stated that the race towards the 2015 elections was gaining pace, with Machar likely to contest for the position of SPLM chairman. It is not clear what will happen in the next National Convention, which has been postponed again and again. Amum is another possible candidate, although questions remain over whether he has the support and legitimacy needed to run.

Equatorians James Wani Igga, Louis Lobong or Joseph Bakosoro may also try to run.

The reaction to the reshuffle has largely been played out through the courts and political means, rather than through armed struggle. There is a possibility that an SPLM opposition force may emerge in parliament, forming around Machar. Mr Copnall stated that South Sudan needed diverse voices in parliament to challenge the rubber-stamped government that was installed following the country's secession from Sudan.

South Sudan did not necessarily emerge as a more democratic country after the reshuffle. Outstanding questions need to be asked. Why has the National Convention not been called? Why is Kiir not prepared to face political opposition? Will Machar break away from the SPLM if he is not allowed to be nominated as chairman? Would Kiir allow himself to be defeated?

Mr Copnall stated that the reshuffle left Kiir even more isolated than before, facing regional and international diplomatic challenges alone. The United States put pressure on the government to investigate alleged human rights abuses in Jonglei state perpetrated by the national army, while the dismissal of Amum has jeopardized crucial talks with Sudan.

Mr Copnall concluded that SPLM politicians had become consumed in a power struggle, at a time when the country desperately needs development. The priority for the new cabinet, and the country, must be to put these power struggles to one side, and focus on governing the country and improving life for the people of South Sudan.

MAREIKE SCHOMERUS

Mareike Schomerus evaluated President Kiir's reshuffle in the context of the impact Juba politics may or may not have on the day-to-day lives of citizens across the country. Although the reshuffle appeared to emphasize the importance of central government, Ms Schomerus argued that this was not necessarily the case.

According to Ms Schomerus, investigating the causes behind Kiir's dismissal of his cabinet narrowed the focus of analysis to a few key players. Such considerations did not assess the impact such changes may have on the population of South Sudan, nor do they investigate the relationship between government and citizens.

Ms Schomerus asked to what extent does the political leadership of South Sudan matter to the people in South Sudan. She stated that, despite the reshuffle, there will be a continuation of South Sudanese politics; a political culture that was adapted from Sudanese political culture following the country's secession from Sudan. On the other hand, the upheaval in government could pave the way for more political space in South Sudan.

The identity of South Sudan as a country locked in political rivalry with Sudan ensured that focus on it at the international level remained fixated on state-building. Emphasis on the political workings of Juba detracted from asking questions about how the government should be held accountable to its citizens; and on the national development side, donors adhered to a language of 'political settlement'. South Sudan's reshuffle could be seen as a reminder of the international community's preoccupation with democratic procedures in government, as opposed to the local reality of governance for the majority of the population.

Ms Schomerus stated that many South Sudanese did not believe the government in Juba had much, if any, impact on their lives. She provided a number of quotes from South Sudanese living in West Equatoria state that demonstrated this disconnect from the government, and the disappointment that was felt over unfulfilled government promises on security and service provision. Support for the government was shown to have remained as low as during the chaos and vulnerability of the border war with Sudan in 2012.

This disconnect was linked to high expectations felt by many South Sudanese over their new government when the country was formed. Promises of democracy and decentralization remain unfulfilled, with the government seen to have centralized power and money, monopolizing access to resources at the expense of the rest of the country.

Ms Schomerus noted that political contestation and the reshuffle had been assessed by policy experts as part of a wider democratic process at work in South Sudan. In reality, liberation for South Sudan had not resulted in democratic governance that was accessible to all; the reshuffle highlighted the extent of Kiir's presidential powers.

Ms Schomerus stated that assessments of Kiir's reshuffle needed to incorporate the needs and expectations South Sudanese had for their government; be that security provision, service delivery, capacity-building or institution-building. It was important to investigate what effect cutting down the number of ministers in government could have on policy delivery and resource availability.

Ms Schomerus stated that there needed to be new ways of thinking about the political restructuring of South Sudan. Kiir's reshuffle should not be evaluated solely at the level of political rivalry, but should be broken down to assess the impact change in South Sudan's governance may have at the level of the citizen.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question

Effective democracy relies on a clear distinction between the army, political parties, the government and the state; yet this distinction is not clear in South Sudan. What bearing do recent political developments have on this issue, and is this likely to change?

Mareike Schomerus

Ms Schomerus stated that the notion of conventional democracy was not necessarily a useful framework to apply to South Sudan. In South Sudan, there is no distinction between these groups so it was unhelpful to push for a distinction. Ms Schomerus noted that it would be a long time before the government of South Sudan was a fully democratic institution; it was more important to focus on the reality of the current political situation in the country.

James Copnall

Mr Copnall stated that there had been a clear effort by the international community to separate the army, the party and the state, but that this was not happening quickly. There had been attempts to minimize the influence of the army, but in South Sudan the army was the primary provider of social security. Furthermore, the government had not shown any willingness to separate these groups. However, the current model was not working if citizens felt disconnected from the government.

Questions

What other factors were behind Kiir's reshuffle, apart from the upcoming National Convention? Could difficulties of governance in South Sudan stem from issues such as the legacy faced by countries emerging from colonialism?

To what extent will the forthcoming National Convention be able to improve relations between South Sudan and Sudan, by reducing tensions between government-supported opposition forces from both countries?

James Copnall

Mr Copnall stated that it was a tragedy that the war had not ended for many people in Sudan and South Sudan. There is a fair suspicion that each country is supporting each other's rebels, and this layer of hostilities between Juba and Khartoum was resulting in a human tragedy for those living in the border areas.

Mareike Schomerus

Ms Schomerus stated that South Sudan was following a well-trodden path of governance, which is a continuation of Sudanese political culture, incorporating Sudanese issues of leadership struggle and patronage. The main question to consider was: could there be a way to make this political culture less destructive, in order to alleviate the situation for those living in the border areas? This led to the further question: how useful would it be to try and completely change this culture, and would change even be possible?

Question

How extensive is the split between the army and the government? The SPLA agreed to investigate alleged human rights abuses in Jonglei: how likely is this to happen?

James Copnall

Mr Copnall stated that the SPLA had announced that the party and the army operated separately, and that this was true to a certain extent. He noted that anyone in the SPLM would have had a background in the SPLA. Kiir would not have gone ahead with the reshuffle without the support of the army. The government were forced to look into the alleged human rights abuses due to political pressure from the United States, although it had said that it would look into such issues previously.

Mareike Schomerus

Ms Schomerus stated that separation between the army and the government may not be the ideal scenario, and that pursuit of this could prove destructive. The truth and reconciliation approach that has often been touted for South Sudan internationally has never been on the agenda for the government and

it may not be constructive to force this. Backdoor communications between the government and the army could be the way forward for Sudan.

Question

What are your perceptions around the potential development of additional pipeline routes in South Sudan that may flow away from Sudan?

Mareike Schomerus

Ms Schomerus noted that any plans for additional oil pipelines would take a long time to enact, and would necessitate huge investment. This approach would only address a small part of a bigger problem on energy and access to resources.

James Copnall

Mr Copnall stated that the oil situation had understandably left South Sudan feeling vulnerable and dependent on Sudan, as 98 per cent of the country's revenue comes from oil exports. If oil pipelines were cut off, the economic situation for South Sudan would become precarious. Nevertheless, building additional pipelines was not an immediate solution at present.

Question

Did Kiir's reshuffle reinforce the domination of the Dinka ethnic group in the government? Could a possible solution to this be the formation of a multi-ethnic, transitional government that would pave the way towards elections?

James Copnall

Mr Copnall stated that President Kiir had made a strong effort to balance his cabinet, selecting ministers from all regions of South Sudan, including for senior positions. Referring to South Sudan's political trajectory, he noted that it had been a difficult couple of years for the country, and that expectations had been set very high. However, there were many issues that were of real concern.

Mareike Schomerus

Ms Schomerus noted that it was irrelevant to distribute ministry positions on an ethnicity basis. The question should be: how can South Sudan write its national history? All of the issues raised in the debate were part of this wider question.

Ms Schomerus stated that even if the government was found to be 'Dinka-dominated', there were further layers within this category, invoking a spectrum of how the people of South Sudan see their country in different ways. She noted that this was a symptom that did not address the national history of the country, and this would not be solved by an ethnically diverse government.

Question

When will the day-to-day functioning of the ministries resume?

James Copnall

Mr Copnall stated that the ministries were meant to have been run by under-secretaries while the cabinet was being re-formed, but administrative function of the government had stalled. He noted that this lack of governance related back to the question over to what extent political leadership in South Sudan mattered to ordinary citizens.

Comment

The government has done a lot to separate the institutions of the army, the government and political parties, and the results of this can be seen with the recent reshuffle. However, the people have the right to reject their government, and there needs to be more room for opposition parties in the country.

Question

In the context of elections, what are the prospects for success at the National Reconciliation Committee, especially in the long-run?

James Copnall

Mr Copnall stated that the National Reconciliation Committee was launched with Riek Machar at its head, and that the process had become hostage to political concerns in an unhealthy manner. The National Reconciliation Committee needed to take place, but tensions could be raised in the process. Furthermore, there should be reconciliation between different communities, but this may not be possible.

Mareike Schomerus

Ms Schomerus noted that the real question should be to what extent will reconciliation be defined as a success. Citizens needed to be made aware of their governing force; not least the reality of being governed, and by a non-hostile force. She stated that the government had to find a way to react with its citizens in a constructive manner; this could be through an engagement process, not necessarily a 'reconciliation process'.