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Estranged Political Relationships: Demystifying the Root Causes of Violent Conflicts in South Sudan

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Abstract

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The breaking of peace agreements and the subsequent perpetuation of civil war in South Sudan are sustained by the failure to adopt broad interventions addressing the many layers of the conflict. An understanding of the multiple causes of the conflict can form the basis for a successful and durable peace agreement. To investigate why violent conflict persists, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 29 major stakeholders, including conflict parties, mediators, eminent South Sudanese personalities, scholars and civil society leaders. The responses were grouped into five major themes: historical conflicts, estranged political relationships, power struggles, resource control and ethnic violence (not included in this article). The results suggest that estranged political relationships, characterized by fear, anger, bitterness, distrust and the urge for revenge, are born out of historical conflicts that remain unresolved. The ensuing power struggles and ethnic violence are motivated by the estranged political relationships between the top leaders. Dealing with their estrangements, therefore, forms the base from which historical conflicts can be addressed towards lasting agreements and sustainable peace in South Sudan.

Keywords: *South Sudan; historical conflicts; political relationships; power struggles; civil war; reconciliation*

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**Estranged Political Relationships:
Demystifying the Root Causes of Violent Conflicts in South Sudan
Sam A. Onapa**

Political manoeuvres, disputes, and estrangement within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) party have led to violent conflicts in South Sudan, now and in the past. These splits are the major obstacles to ending the conflicts in the nascent nation independent only since July 9, 2011. The civil war that broke out on December 15, 2013, originated in the party's planned elections of office bearers between May and December 2013, which inspired a power struggle (de Waal, 2015, p. 195; D. H. Johnson, 2014b, p. 170). In anticipation of the elections, prominent party members, including Dr. Riek Machar, Pagan Amum, and Rebecca Garang, expressed interest in competing for the party chairperson against the incumbent, President Salva Kiir, and advocated for reforms in the party rules to ensure transparent democratic processes (Brosché & Höglund, 2016, p. 76).

The prolonged political mediation processes to end the war, marked by gross intransigence, persistent violations, and finally the collapse of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), one year into its implementation (Vertin, 2018, pp. 10–14), have aroused much debate as to the actual causes of the war (Africa Research Bulletin, 2016, p. 2210). The most significant findings in this article suggest that the unresolved historical conflicts fractured the relationships in the SPLM and have since left the members in a state of estranged political relationships. Estranged political relationships then shaped the power struggles, party elections disputes, and coup allegations, characterized by negative emotions of fear, anger, bitterness, distrust, and the urge for revenge—leading to the violent conflict (Fisher et al., 2000, p. 29).

Therefore, the negative emotional state of the SPLM members that emanated from the unresolved historical conflicts is a factor that renders mediation efforts unachievable and exacerbates the conflict. For example, the SPLM conflict parties dishonoured the Arusha Reunification Agreement signed in Arusha, Tanzania, in January 2015, under the auspices of the ruling Tanzanian Chama Cha Mapinduzi party and the African National Congress of South Africa with the support of the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni (Chama Cha Mapinduzi, 2015). Similarly, the renewed High-Level Revitalization Forum led by the East African regional body, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), to steer ARCSS back on course through an inclusive multi-stakeholder process beyond the SPLM parties, commenced in Addis Ababa in December 2017 with the signing of the Cessation of

Hostilities Agreement (CoHA). However, several violations by the parties have since occurred (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2018). Furthermore, the Revitalized ARCSS (R-ARCSS) concluded on September 12, 2018, in Addis Ababa, has seen some parties—including the National Salvation Front (NAS) and the People’s Democratic Movement (PDM)—reject the agreement, whereas others—including the SPLM-Former Detainees (FDs)—signed with reservations (International Crisis Group, 2019, p. 10).

This study furthers the theoretical understanding of the embeddedness of historical conflict constructs in the SPLM party, the build-up in estranged political relationships, and the subsequent power struggles leading to violent conflicts in South Sudan. It therefore enhances our understanding of the application of conflict management, resolution and transformation theories, and the extent to which the conflict remains unaddressed—hence the perpetuation of violence. Secondly, it provides a more robust understanding of the causes of the conflict by establishing the linkages between the structural, proximate, and immediate causes of the conflict (Ackermann, 2003, pp. 341-342). In so doing, it categorizes the levels of conflict into primary, secondary, and tertiary segments where the historical conflicts, estranged political relationships, and power struggles, respectively, are identified. From the power struggle perspective, the power-sharing arrangement provided for in ARCSS would appear to be enough. However, unpredictable developments in ending the conflict, in invariably fragile political relationships, suggests that there is more required from the stakeholders in addressing the causes of the conflict. Although Rolandsen (2015) opens with the power struggle events, his conclusion discusses important dimensions of the causes of the conflict: “Underlying factors such as civil war legacies, neo-patrimonialism, and a weak state made a new civil war in South Sudan possible, if not unavoidable” (p. 171). Particular examples of civil war legacies and neo-patrimonialism occurred during the formation of the SPLM in 1983 and the 1991 coup attempt—both plagued by leadership and ideological disputes (Arnold, 2007, pp. 490-491).

An understanding of the root or underlying causes of the conflict is important because, if unaddressed, they can perpetuate conflict (Hauss, 2003, para. 16, 31). If addressed, however, they could form a basis for sustainable solutions because “they are often considered also to mark the level at which an intervention would be effective” (Marks, 2011, p. 60). Additionally, a thorough understanding of the interconnectedness and sequence of the various single factors is crucial in defining the causes of the civil war (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2005, pp. 109-110). Concerning the levels of intervention,

Rambsbotham et al. (2005) suggested “there are immediate triggering factors, underlying sources of tension, and deeper structural conditions which shape events” and “the longer term and the immediate causes work together to bring about war” (p. 112). Similarly, Fisher et al. (2000, p. 29), using a conflict tree analogy, listed causes as being at the root, core problem at the trunk, and effects at the branches. Other than the power struggles being an immediate cause, the civil war legacy of violent conflict has imposed structural contradictions as a primary cause, arising from political and economic exclusions that are exacerbated by undemocratic practices and exclusive control of resources, especially oil (D. H. Johnson, 2014a, p. 204).

As discussed above, causes of the conflict at the primary and tertiary levels are well articulated in the scholarly discourse. However, at the secondary level, there is a paucity of research on the aspect of emotions, which relates to personalities and relationships among the parties, and yet “emotions often cause disputes to escalate and sometimes even cause negotiations to break down” (Maiese, 2005, para.7).

This article explores the role of estranged political relationships within the SPLM in sustaining the violent conflict status quo and explores the intrinsic nature of the primary, secondary, and tertiary causes of the conflict in South Sudan. The first section articulates the theoretical orientation grounding the study, focusing on the transformation of relationships to sustainable peace. It then describes the research approach and the empirical setting of the study and outlines the research methods applied to collect and analyze the data. The proceeding section sets the conflict context by examining the history of the second civil war in South Sudan, leading to the formation of the SPLM, hence the basis of the primary causes of the conflict. Following this history, the article discusses the secondary causes of the conflict arising from schisms and estrangement among the SPLM members after the second civil war ended. Further discussions follow on the power struggles that flared up in December 2013, escalating to the current civil war forming the tertiary or immediate causes of the conflict. The article then discusses the key findings of the study narrowed down to the role of estranged political relationships, the psychological and emotional impact, and the ramifications on the conflict. The conclusion restates the study findings, recommendations for future research, and avenues to address the conflict.

Theoretical Background

Achieving sustainable solutions to the conflict in South Sudan is a primary concern faced by the stakeholders to the peace process. As observed, a polarized SPLM leadership

engenders the conflict, a situation that has led to prolonged mediation processes and the violations of agreements reached so far. The conundrum raises questions about the causes of disputes, estrangement among the SPLM leadership, and the intractability of the conflict. Addressing this question is significant in the sense that it entails a multidimensional approach to the problem towards sustainable solutions. In this regard, three significant theories namely Conflict Management, Conflict Resolution, and Conflict Transformation theories (Lederach, 2003, p. 3) bear close correlation to the solutions to the South Sudan conflict at different levels. This section discusses these theories and the extent of their practicability at the various levels of the conflict.

According to Miall (2004), conflict management theory sees the consequences of violent conflicts as irreversible and therefore, can only be managed and contained (pp. 3-5). Miall further contrasts conflict resolution theory, which envisions the possibility of dealing with the consequences of violent conflict by helping the parties “reframe their positions and interest,” while exploring the root causes of conflict through skilled unofficial third-party interventions. The CoHA (2017, pp. 1-15) and the conclusion of power-sharing and security arrangements in Chapters I and II of R-ARCSS (2018) were measures aimed at the management and resolution of the power struggles that ignited the violence on December 15, 2013 (pp. 1-48). Broadly, these measures were limited to the immediate causes of the conflict. Transcending conflict management to conflict resolution, the implementation R-ARCSS leads to Chapter V (pp. 62–68), which addresses the legacy of conflicts and transitional justice mechanisms. However, R-ARCSS is silent on the internal strife that has plagued SPLM since its formation in 1983, culminating in the power struggles and ultimately the civil war. In this regard, Miall (2004) elaborated that conflict transformation goes beyond “reframing positions and the identification of win-win outcomes” and is “a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict” (p. 6).

According to Lederach (2003),

Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the *ebb* and *flow* of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships. (p. 14)

Thus far, responses to the conflict in South Sudan have not proportionately led to a reduction in violence, increased justice, nor addressed the negative aspect of human relations

(Blanchard, 2014, pp. 2, 13; Human Rights Watch, 2019). Lederach (2003) affirmed that the patterns of the past “provide the context from which the immediate issues of dispute rise to the surface” though they do not “have the power to positively change what has already transpired” (p. 35). By restricting conflict legacies to 2005, Chapter V of R-ARCSS (2018) downplayed the significance and impact of prior conflicts in South Sudan (p. 64). To underscore this point, a day before the outbreak of the conflict on December 15, 2013, President Salva Kiir accused Riek Machar in the meeting of National Liberation Council (NLC), for splitting SPLM in the 1990s (D. H. Johnson, 2014a, p. 171). Stemming from the past, Lederach (2003) visualized a hopeful future, asking questions as to what needs to be built, and how to “address all level-immediate solutions as well as underlying patterns of relationships and structures,” towards multi-dimensional change processes (pp. 36-37). Despite providing for a transitional justice mechanism, R-ARCSS was devoid of positively transformed relationships among the conflict parties—a component that is necessary for the desired peace and stability.

Galtung (1996) identified “equitable relations” as a probable condition for peace (p. 1). He argued that conflicts form when contradictions occur following pursuit of similar interests by opposing parties leading to disputes and subsequently, behavioral tendencies that are either destructive or constructive, arising from attitudes and emotions triggered by the contradictions (pp. 70-73, 89). Accordingly, conflict transformation occurs when the contradiction leading to the dispute is addressed while ensuring that the attitudes and emotions, and corresponding behavior, lead to constructive outcomes (p. 85). In this regard, Galtung classified three conflict factors, which could be multi-dimensional, as being crucial in conflict transformation: Behavior at the manifest level, and Attitudes and Contradictions at the latent level. The main contradictions within the SPLM that began in 1983 were related to leadership disputes and the objectives of the civil war (Jok & Hutchinson, 1999, p. 126). Subsequently, estrangement in relationships and negative attitudes occurred, which ultimately manifested in the form of power struggles followed by violent conflict.

A conflict transformation approach, therefore, provides a transcendence from the current focus of management of the consequential aspects of the conflict. In particular, a deeper understanding of how conflict legacies in their entirety negatively influence relationships among the belligerents calls for a multi-dimensional approach to the conflict. For example, in addressing the power struggles, the aspect of equitable relations among the SPLM leaders becomes crucial.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative research, a description and analysis of “the culture and behaviour of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied,” was the overall design approach (Bryman, 2003, p. 46). The sample selected for this study included 29 participants purposely recruited with specific reference to particular political and social constituencies (Baker & Edwards, 2012, pp. 8-9). The participants were categorized into five subgroups of stakeholders in the conflict setting, shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participants by Category

Serial	Category	In Category	No. of Participants
1	Conflict Parties	SPLM-In Government(IG), SPLM-In Opposition (IO) and Others	8
2	Mediators	IGAD, AU, UN, Faith Organizations	6
3	Eminent Persons	Former Deputy Premier, Vice President, Ambassador	4
4	Scholars	Vice-Chancellors, Professors, Directors	7
5	Civil Society Organization’s (CSOs)	Heads of CSOs	4
Total			29

A semi-structured in-depth interview protocol was developed through which participants shared their knowledge and experiences of the current and historical conflicts in South Sudan (Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 2). The interview protocol was designed to address the research question: “What are the causes of the disputes and estrangement among the SPLM political elite leading to the violent conflicts?”

Before gathering the primary data, secondary and historical data were reviewed, including reports, minutes of meetings, peace agreements, books, articles, and video recordings. This preliminary research helped to understand the background of the current conflict, as well as the recurrent themes in previous studies. Participants with a rich, in-depth knowledge of the complex historical nature of the conflict, including those who have been a part of the conflict, were purposefully selected (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, pp. 78-79). The participants were recruited through telephone contacts established through the African Union (AU) and by word of mouth. Participants from the SPLM-In Government (IG) were recruited through a formal request made to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Sudan. Each participant was provided with an information sheet that indicated the study protocol, and a consent form in which they were asked to agree to participation, audio recording and identification or anonymity in the study reports, to conform with the University of New England Human Research Ethics processes.

The review of the literature and essential documents identified specific recurring patterns and themes related to the conflict situation. Similar patterns and themes also emerged from the raw data gathered through the interviews. Using an NVivo software analysis process, relevant information was identified from the transcribed data. The information was coded by assigning concepts relevant to the research question and categorized into five dominant themes. The analysis combined two approaches: 1) a deductive analysis arising from prior assumptions on the themes from literature and historical documents (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 30) and; 2) an inductive analysis where findings “emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data.”

With regard to biases, the researcher believes sustainable peace is possible through processes that are anchored in conflict transformation practices—that is, addressing root causes of conflicts and applying multifaceted approaches (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The biases are informed by career experiences in inter-religious and civil society peaceful coexistence and reconciliation processes in the conflicts in Sudan.

Historical Background

The Multiplicity of Causes

Several scholars have hinted at unresolved historical factors being responsible for the current conflict (Rolandsen, 2015, p. 171; Young, 2015, p. 57). According to a Human Rights Watch report, the ethnic cleavages following the outbreak of the fighting in December 2013 can be traced to “historical grievances and divisions” that happened during a similar conflict

in 1991 (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 18). Similarly, Vertin (2018, pp. 2, 8) referenced “ethnic divisions of an unreconciled past” and says the massacre in Juba was ethnically motivated. These positions are confirmed by the findings of this study linking historical grievances, divisions in the SPLM after power struggles, and ethnic violence. Temin (2018), argued that the war cannot be attributed to a single cause and singled out “political competition between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, corruption, competition for resources, unresolved grievances from past conflicts, lack of accountability for crimes, and a fragmented security sector” (pp. 5-6).

The SPLM Born and Riddled with Violent Conflict

Conflicts characterized by political disputes leading to confrontations are not a new occurrence among the SPLM leadership. The formation of the SPLM/Army (SPLM/A) in July 1983 not only marked the beginning of the second civil war in Sudan but also caused disagreements between the southern political leaders (Young, 2007, p. 13). Colonel John Garang, an officer in Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), while on a mission to facilitate the transfer of mutinying southern soldiers in Bor, to the north of Sudan, seized the opportunity to defect, and in alliance with the mutineers and Anyanya II rebels, formed the SPLM/A (Scott, 1985, p. 71; Young, 2007, p. 13). However, this alliance was punctuated by the internecine conflict that divided the nascent movement, especially over the leadership formation and the objectives of the struggle (Hutchinson, 2001, pp. 310-311). According to Johnson, (2011), the older Anyanya veterans, led by Samuel Gai Tut, lost to the younger group led by John Garang and were acrimoniously bundled out of the SPLM/A (p. 215).

Human Rights Watch (2003) captured the extent of the conflict in an interview with Biel Torkech Rambang, a Nuer representative, in Washington, D.C: “political, leadership, and personality problems cropped up within the rebel movement between the two factions in the SPLM/A... The SPLA fought its first battles against Anyanya II” (p. 100).

Some participants in the study conferred that this primary cause was indeed devastating to the movement. According to Bol Makueng Yuol (personal communication, March 21, 2018), the SPLM Secretary for Information, Culture, and Communication:

Anyanya II had a structured leadership led by one Akuot Atem and when they met with John Garang's group who started another rebellion in 1983, there was a disagreement on the strategy of the war... In the end, they disagreed and fought for three years.

While relating to the war legacies within the SPLM, Dr Itto Anne (personal communication, March 26, 2018), former Deputy Secretary-General of the SPLM and a member of the East African Legislative Assembly, stated:

The problems in SPLM did not start at independence, there were issues that existed right from the inception of the SPLM where Dr John and the other founders had some problems and in the end, Dr John and his vision propelled what seemed to be a rebellion into a liberation movement.

According to Edmund Yakani (personal communication, March 14, 2018), the Executive Director of Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, “Disagreement was at the foundation of the SPLM in 1983, which remained silent until the early 1990s when the same questions on what was the aim of the struggle arose...”.

Why did the Anyanya II leaders defy Garang’s leadership in the first place, and was his leadership legitimate? According to Guarak, after failing to convince their Ethiopian benefactor, President Mengistu, to accept the secession option for South Sudan, the leaders unanimously opted for the New Sudan option, but later failed to agree on who should lead the SPLM/A, prompting Akuot Atem to impose himself as the Chairman (2011, pp. 292–294). There was, however, a reprieve from the power struggle when it was agreed that the leader would be democratically elected but Akuot Atem and Samuel Gai Tut would later reject the outcome of the election, which Garang won, becoming the SPLM/A leader (Guarak, 2011, pp. 295-296).

From the election perspective, it could be argued that Garang’s leadership was legitimate. The Anyanya II, a group that rejected the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement and pioneered the second liberation struggle as early as 1975, was upstaged by Garang who joined them in 1983 and remained discontented (Rolandsen, 2005, p. 26). Arguably, the Anyanya II members had positioned themselves as the de-facto leaders of the second liberation struggle by virtue of being the pioneers and therefore felt betrayed when a relatively new and younger entrant took over the reign of the movement and violently ejected them from their bases in Ethiopia (Craze, Tubiana, & Gramizzi, 2016, p. 23). Furthermore, the matter was exacerbated when an attempt by Garang, almost eight months later, to reunite the SPLM/A factions ended tragically when Samuel Gai Tut was killed in an ambush set by Garang’s Deputy, Kerubino Kwanyin Bol (Guarak, 2011, pp. 307–310; Nyaba, 1997, p. 38). Thus, the matter remained unresolved.

Control of Resources, a Basis for the Conflict

The reason these parties took up arms against the government of Sudan was to fight against economic, social, and political marginalization, a cause dating back to the first liberation struggle under the Anyanya that ended in 1972 (H. F. Johnson, 2016, pp. 3-4; Young, 2012, pp. 20, 25). The question that arises is whether the Anyanya II leaders relinquished their cause for the liberation and self-determination for South Sudan after the 1983 debacle, by allying with the Sudan government against Garang's SPLM struggle for the total liberation of a New Sudan (Young, 2005, p. 538). By joining forces with the Sudan government against the SPLM/A, the Anyanya II undermined their objective, as well as that of the SPLM/A (Nyaba, 1997, p. 49).

A follow-up question would be whether the Anyanya II and their followers would achieve their crusade for economic, social, and political freedom if the SPLM, also pursuing a similar cause, succeeded. As seen from the situation under the SPLM today, where conflicts motivated by the same factors are evident, the answer would be in the negative. Riek Machar's SPLM/A Nasir faction allied with former Anyanya II under Paulino Matip, forming the South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF) in 1997 and drawing their support from their oil-rich home bases of Unity, Upper Nile, and Jonglei states. Apart from being a proxy militia for the Khartoum government in drilling oil from the three states, they also signed contracts directly with oil companies, a situation they have tried to maintain after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the second civil war, through to the independence of South Sudan, by the proliferation of conflict (Arnold, 2007, pp. 491-501).

The oil factor introduces the aspect of control of resources as a basis for the conflict. Ambassador Joram Biswaro (personal communication, March 29, 2018), Head of the AU Mission in South Sudan who participated in the IGAD mediation process, suggested the causes were "multifaceted but looking at the current conflict, it should be struggle for power within the leadership of the SPLM and particularly political power which gives you access to everything in terms of resources and their distribution." Another participant in the mediation process, Nicholas Haysom (personal communication, November 29, 2017), the United Nations Secretary General's Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, stated that in the backdrop of a deprived economy "conflict over state resources takes collateral damage, combined with patronage." Ambassador Francis Mading Deng (personal communication, March 23, 2018), a former South Sudan Permanent Representative to the UN, pointed to the inadequate governance structures left by the British colonial power whereby "the autonomous

structures were replaced by a centralized authority, and the centralized authority was the means of accessing services, development and everything.”

From that historical perspective, the unfulfilled quest for economic, social, and political freedom stands out as a primary, structural, underlying factor in the conflict and violence in South Sudan.

Unfinished Business: A Coup against Garang

Having vanquished his opponents who only wanted autonomy, Garang’s supremacy as the SPLM/A leader seemed undisputed (Young, 2007, p. 13), and he enlisted Anyanya II forces in the SPLA ranks (Craze et al., 2016, p. 23). Despite that milestone, another conflict would emerge with devastating consequences in 1991, at a time when the SPLM/A was making remarkable headway against the Sudanese army and had gained control over vast areas of the Southern territory (Nyaba, 1997, p. 38). Dr Riek Machar, commander of the SPLA Nassir front, together with Lam Akol and Gordon Koang, unsuccessfully staged a coup against Garang (Jok & Hutchinson, 1999, p. 126). Their reasons for the coup were listed as dictatorial leadership, failure to pursue a struggle for an independent South Sudan, and human rights abuses in the SPLM/A—including the killing of senior leaders on Garang’s orders (Young, 2005, p. 540, 2012, p. 54). Bishop Emeritus Paride Taban narrated how Riek Machar confided in him about his coup plan, giving his reason as worries “concerning the movement itself, the power within and the upkeep of democracy” (Eisman, 2011, p. 115). According to Emmanuel Solomon Ajang (personal communication, December 20, 2017), a member of the SPLM-IO:

Riek Machar joined the SPLM/A in 1984, and about 1989 started questioning the dictatorship in the movement and the promotion of members to the high command, including arbitrary arrests. This continued until 1991 when Riek Machar, Lam Akol and Gordon Koang split the movement in a coup.

The coup attempt was a serious violation of political and military leadership norms. However, the allegations of dictatorship hence, limitations in channels of addressing grievances, also requires scrutiny. Fisher et al. (2000) argued that conflict is a result of incompatible goals between two or more parties and “becomes violent when there are inadequate channels for dialogue and disagreement” and “dissenting voices and deeply held grievances cannot be heard and addressed” (pp. 4, 6). Since its inception, dictatorship and undemocratic practices are primary, structural issues that have remained latent within the SPLM party.

The Return of Riek Machar, Feathers Ruffled

Despite the 1991 Nasir coup set back, Riek Machar returned to the SPLM fold following the Nairobi Declaration of January 2002, at a time when the negotiations to end the civil war with the Sudan government were in advanced stages (Young, 2003, p. 429). Although John Garang supported Riek Machar's return, he was not entirely accepted in the SPLM. Dr Luka Biong (personal communication, November 22, 2018), Professor of Practice for Security Studies at the National Defence University's Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, Washington D.C., and former Minister of the Presidency of the Government of Southern Sudan, narrated:

Riek Machar was number six in hierarchy and Salva was third and moved up to become the Deputy Chairman to John Garang and Riek argued that both Dr John and Salva are Dinka and could not be number one and two in that order and therefore he should be number two...

Dr. Biong quoted Kiir's response:

"When Riek Machar left, he knew our hierarchy and even before he left, he was junior to me, so what would make him be senior to me? Second, I have never betrayed this movement so is this the reward that I have never rebelled [that] I am now being asked to be relegated. Third, if leadership is about people with PhD, then I am leaving it to you because you are people of PhD and fourth, if the people of Bar el Ghazal are not eligible to lead, then now we leave it to Upper Nile... I am done with the SPLM..."

It further transpired Salva Kiir demanded that Riek Machar be relegated to the tail end of the SPLM leadership arguing that rebellion should not be rewarded. The tension eased when James Wani Iga offered to relinquish his number three position to Riek Machar. Subsequently, the political and power relations issues between Salva Kir and Riek Machar point to these structural issues, which according to Dr Luka Biong, "are those grudges that were not resolved over time and they started resurfacing."

John Garang and Salva Kiir, SPLM on the Brink

As the CPA negotiations were nearing conclusion, in November 2004, there was a threat to the stability and cohesion of the SPLM. In what Young (2005) described as being almost a coup against Garang, Salva Kiir alleged that Garang was planning to arrest and replace him with Nhial Deng, allegedly because he was against the peace process (p. 540). A four-day meeting from November 29 to December 1, 2004, convened to address the crisis, but ended with a flurry of dictatorial allegations levelled against Garang by various members

of the SPLM (*Sudan Tribune*, March 12, 2008). Referring to the dispute between John Garang and Salva Kiir, Ambassador Francis Mading Deng (personal communication, March 23, 2018), said “before Garang died, Salva Kiir and Garang almost came to loggerheads in 2004. There were rumours that Garang was going to replace Salva Kiir with somebody better qualified academically and otherwise.” Likewise, a senior member of the SPLM Secretariat (personal communication, March 29, 2018), described the near crisis: “...in 2004, there was a problem between...Salva Kiir and John Garang in New site, which almost resulted in an armed conflict. ...That conflict was resolved in Rumbek...though they agreed to work together, the problem seemed to be embedded.”

Although the Rumbek meeting averted the tension with the assurance that Salva would retain his number two position, the accommodation and protection of all members, and “slow” reforms in the party, the disgruntlement was unresolved. Young (2015, p. 13) ascertained that Salva Kiir was sidelined in decision-making processes, despite being number two in the party hierarchy, and though subsequently promoted in the army, he was relieved of his position of Chief of Staff and retired on suspicion of hatching a coup plot. It is therefore unlikely that Salva Kiir's retirement from the army and retention as the Vice Chairman of SPLM, without a clear role, could have logically ended the simmering conflict in the SPLM. However, his replacement as Chief of Staff, following the coup plot allegation, is an affirmation that the SPLM derives its power from the military rather than from the political sphere. As was the case in 1983, the looming power struggle and the coup plot allegation were issues that point to primary underlying structural contradictions in the form of dictatorship and lack of democracy in the SPLM.

Ghosts of the Past: Post Civil War and Post-Independence

The End of the Second Civil War, New Leader Resisted

The death of John Garang in July 2005 handed Salva Kiir the top-most position in the SPLM/A virtue of the provisions of the 1994 Chukudum National Convention resolutions, appointments, and protocol (Sudan People’s Liberation Movement, 1994). In the backdrop of his removal from the position of Army Chief of Staff and eventual retirement from the SPLA, Salva Kiir seemed an unlikely successor to John Garang. However, fate and the hierarchical protocol provided by the 1994 Chukudum Convention, ensured his ascension to the SPLM/A chairperson position. Thiong (2018) argued that after the death of John Garang, “a group of loyalists began to position itself to make decisions regarding the distribution of influence and

wealth” (p. 13), resulting in unfavourable power realignments and the conflict. The point of significance is that the “group of loyalists,” *aka* the “Garang Boys,” probably being aware of the direction their leader had taken against Salva Kiir, were in the first place opposed to his ascension to the top party position. The Honourable Atem Garang de Kuek (personal communication, March 18, 2018), the SPLM Chief Whip confirmed the “Garang Boys” position:

John Garang died, but he had moulded some young students in the movement who eventually became generals in the army and politicians, and they thought they would succeed John Garang. They felt Salva might not be following in the footsteps of John Garang. Even though they continued to work together, the division was there. These included Pagan Amum, Oyai Deng Ajak, Ger Chuang, Ayi Tang and, Deng Alor (who was not a student but a young official of the foreign service joining in 1983) and they were dubbed Garang boys. ...So, they felt they had the keys while others may not be privy to the inner workings of the movement and, therefore, should be the leaders. In their view, Salva was a man without ideology.

Although the outcome of the 2004 SPLM Rumbek meeting portrayed a perception of a side-lined Salva Kiir and the subsequent resistance to his leadership, the situation seemed to have evolved in his favor, post CPA in 2005. According to Dr. Luka Biong (personal communication, November 22, 2018) “... it was in a rally in Rumbek, before the helicopter crash, when he said if anything happens to me, this is the person who is going to lead, referring to Salva, so he was very clear about succession.” This pronouncement, Dr. Biong added, was instrumental in settling the looming succession dispute when “Elijah Malok, who is Dr. John's uncle, together with Rebecca Garang said Dr. John had already laid down the process of succession, so it was difficult for those in opposition to Salva to make a change.”

The manoeuvres and power realignments again played out in the second SPLM national convention in July 2008, where Salva Kiir attempted to remove Riek Machar from the Vice Chairman Position and Pagan Amum from the Secretary-General Position (Young, 2012, p. 142). Young’s (2012, p. 142) exposé of the national convention indicates that Riek Machar expressed interest in competing for the top party position against Kiir, and this could be the reason for the attempt to replace him.

On the other hand, Kiir's intention to replace Pagan Amum because “he was not happy” with him may be attributed to Pagan's tag of “Garang Boys.” Thiong (2018, p. 14) recounted how the looming crisis was averted following the concern and wise counsel of

elders Abel Alier and Joseph Lagu. Atem Garang de Kuek (personal communication, March 18, 2018) attested to that situation:

In 2008, a group, which was being led by Salva and which also included the Garang boys, wanted to relegate Riek to number three and elevate James Wannu Igga to number two a position, which Riek was not going to take lying down. The war which broke out in 2013 should have happened then but was assuaged when the status quo was maintained. In my view that was the postponement of the 2013 fighting.

The political tensions during the 2008 National Convention exhibited between Salva Kiir, Riek Machar, and the “Garang Boys” pointed to deep-seated distrust which is a characteristic of estrangement in relationships. This estrangement explains the existence of the three SPLM factions; the SPLM-IG, SPLM-IO, and SPLM-FD and was a major contributing factor to the 2013 conflict.

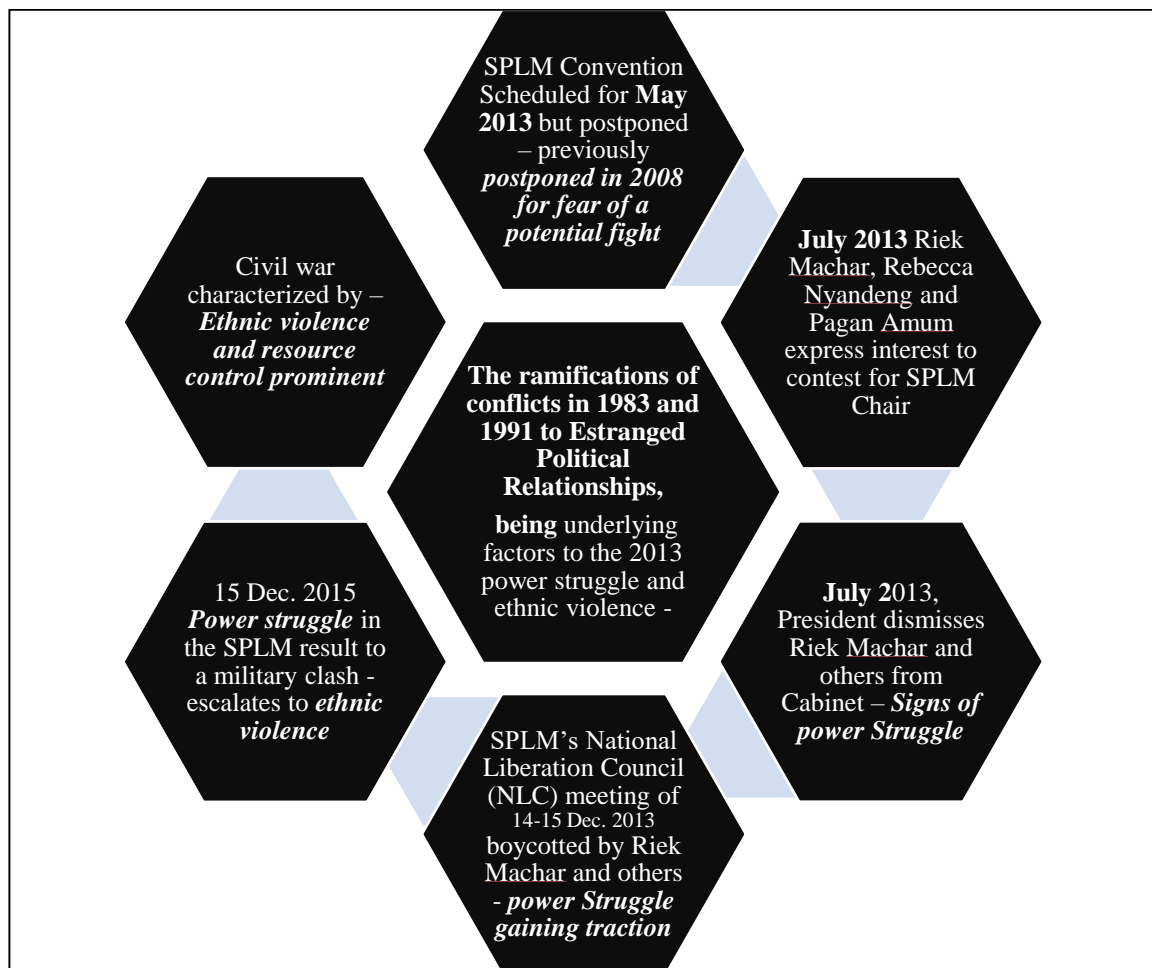
SPLM and the Perils of Democracy

The incident of December 2013 provided the basis for understanding the immediate cause of violent conflict. In anticipation of the South Sudan national elections in 2015, a key demand by the group in opposition to Salva Kiir was the need for reforms in the party, which in their view would institute a level playing field for free and fair competition in the party. Recalling that the “Garang Boys” were apprehensive of Salva Kiir’s ascension to the top party position, the reforms would probably provide an opportunity to eject Salva Kiir from the top seat, but instead, the “Garang Boys” were dismissed from their cabinet and party positions (H. F. Johnson, 2016, pp. 165-169). A plausible explanation is that, as their “Garang Boys” tag suggests, they intended to carry on John Garang’s CPA legacy that they felt was under threat by Salva Kiir’s administration and the orchestration of the Khartoum government (H. F. Johnson, 2016, p. 155). If the outcome of the Rumbek meeting of 2004 that resulted in the removal of Salva Kiir from the powerful position of Chief of Staff was significant, then Kiir would not take the “Garang Boys” position lightly. Aldo Ajor (personal communication, March 30, 2018), a senior SPLM member, and a former Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy Speaker of Parliament in Sudan, was unequivocal that there was a power struggle in the SPLM emanating from the dictatorial design of the party under John Garang. Accordingly, “the reason for the fight in 2013 was the call to transform it from a dictatorial party into a democratic one, which was not appreciated by the one on top, Salva Kiir.”

This explanation clearly states that the immediate cause was a power struggle following a call for transformation in the party. A Professor of Peace and Development in Juba (personal conversation, March 17, 2018) viewed it as being about power dynamics saying: “This is not a new phenomenon as the SPLM has always been a party prone to division.”

The matter of division and confrontation in the party is a prominent one. Underlying the confrontations leading to power struggles is the estrangement in political relationships have their origins in historical conflicts as earlier pointed out. Figure 1 illustrates the centric prominence of the historical conflicts in the SPLM around which subsequent conflicts evolve.

Figure 1. The centricity of the 1983 and 1991 SPLM historical conflicts to the subsequent conflicts in South Sudan.



The Role of Estranged Political Relationships

The state of relationships among the party members is critical in responding to the dictates of the underlying primary historical factors of the conflict. This section discusses the role of estranged political relationships in fomenting violent conflict in South Sudan.

Political relationships are impersonal relationships that function through political institutions (Barkin, 2003, p. 333). Institutions are systems embedded in the structure of organizations that shape or regulate behaviours of groups or individuals to “promote moderate and cooperative behaviour among contending groups by fostering a positive-sum perception of political interactions” (Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003, p. 318). According to North (1990) “institutions reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life” and “include any form of constraint that human beings devise to shape human interaction” (pp. 3-4), the constraints being what one is prohibited from doing or the conditions under which specific tasks can be performed. However, in the process of interactions through the political institutions, the relationships may take on a personal nature (Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003, p. 320; Murphy, 2010, p. 25).

Since political relationships primarily function through political institutions, whose viability depend on sound values, rules, and norms that govern the institutions, the violations are tantamount to a breach in the political relationships. Murphy (2010) underscored this point: “Political relationships are violated when shared normative expectations are violated and trust undermined” (p. 14). In this context, political relationships are examined through the institutions in South Sudan, through which the SPLM functions. Currently, the primary instrument to provide for this is the Revitalized ARCSS (R-ARCSS), which provides the roadmap for the power-sharing and political engagements, as well as a permanent constitution-making process (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2018b). Concerning historical conflicts in the SPLM going back to 1983 and in the absence of a state, there was no formal institution in place. That void is, however, covered by informal institutions which Khan says function “when there are no formal rules written down and enforced by formal (state) enforcement, but there are nevertheless ‘rules’ that are systematic enough to be identified” (Khan, 2010, p. 63).

Following this argument, the SPLM leaders experienced estrangement in relationships when the norms and values of the party were violated, especially in 1983 and 1991, leading to violent conflicts. These incidents leading to estrangement are confirmed by the findings of this study that show the SPLM has perpetually been a fragmented party and incapable of

leading a nation that has just emerged from civil war. Notwithstanding, the SPLM leadership assumed power despite their political relationships dominated by negative emotions from unresolved grievances. While describing the relationships among the SPLM leaders, Barney Afako (personal conversation, November 20, 2017), a member of the IGAD and the UN Mediation Support Unit Standby Team, said:

It is correct to say that the leadership is quite fractured because there were tensions throughout the years of the struggle in the leadership. This came to a head in 2013 because there were different visions of where the SPLM should be going and this created tension within the political leadership and within the military and this led to the initial fighting which then spread across the country.

According to Dr Angelina Mattijo-Bazugba (personal conversation, March 17, 2018), Director of the Institute for Transformational Leadership at the University of Juba, the struggle was a rallying point in the SPLM, but the divisions would ultimately emerge:

In the past, there was one common enemy, which was the regime in Khartoum that enabled the SPLM to bring the people together. However, after the liberation, cracks started developing in the SPLM, and the war in 2013 is the culmination of the fracture of the party where we now have SPLM-IG, IO, and FDs. Since then, the party has remained divided to the extent that the agreement of August 2015 failed to hold.

In an account that portrays a dramatic event, a representative of the SPLM-IO (personal conversation, November 28, 2017) relayed: “In December 2013, the meeting happened and on the second day of the convention, Salva Kiir recalled the 1991 Nasir coup incident saying he never betrayed the SPLM or South Sudanese.” Similarly, Professor Lual Acuek Deng (personal conversation, March 17, 2018), Managing Director of Ebony Centre for Strategic Studies, described what appears to be the straw that broke the camel’s back:

[But] concerning 1991 the president is still angry and he said he does not want a repeat of the same. After the president spoke on the 14th December 2013, I was interviewed by Reuters and I said the war has already started. I was asked why and I said because of the way the president has spoken. The word was there and he said he does not want a repeat of 1991. He came down from the podium and left without greeting Dr. Riek.

According to Abraham Awolich (personal conversation, March 14, 2018), Acting Executive Director, The Sudd Institute, the current conflict that broke out in 2013 was a spill-over from the past and “while Riek Machar and Lam Akol were welcomed back to the SPLM

in 2002 following the 1991 coup, they were seen as betrayers who weakened the cause of the South Sudanese people.” A Director of a Women’s Organization (personal conversation, March 9, 2018) said: “All in all, the events of December 2013 were a result of cumulative issues that were not addressed, just like putting a plaster on a septic wound hoping that it would heal.” Dr. Anne Itto (personal conversation, March 26, 2018), also clarified: “Although John Garang accepted Riek Machar back to the SPLM after the 1991 coup, his relationships with the other members of the SPLM were not cordial.” The demise of Dr. John Garang, therefore, exacerbated the fragility in the relationships.

According to the International Crisis Group report (2011, p. 13), Machar and Akol, and sections of their supporters, returned to the SPLM in 2002 and 2003. Akol then left again in 2009. Many within the “mainstream” SPLM/A have never forgiven those who “split.” The role of estranged political relationships in exacerbating the conflict, therefore, cannot be overstated.

Psychological Impact of Estranged Political Relationships

Several scholars in psychology and other disciplines have investigated the dynamics and role of emotion in influencing attitudes and behaviours in conflict (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001; Halperin, Porat, Tamir, & Gross, 2013; Lindner, 2006). Bar-Tal and Halperin (2013), while discussing the role of emotion in the eruption of intractable conflicts, wrote that “they are based on severe grievances and contentions that are accompanied by strong emotional feelings” and belief in “brutal acts committed by the other group, which are viewed as unjustified and immoral” (pp. 7-8). These evoke group outrage and the desire for revenge. Halperin, Cohen-Chen, and Goldenberg (2014) stated that intergroup emotions have political implications:

...political attitudes go above and beyond the effects of other prominent factors, such as ideology and socio-economic conditions... The process begins with the occurrence of a new event and/or appearance of new information related to the conflict and/or recollection of a past conflict-related event. The event or information can be negative (e.g., war, terror attack, rejection of a peace offer) or positive (e.g., a peace gesture, willingness to compromise), but it must be appraised as meaningful. In most cases, these events are experienced directly only by a handful of ingroup members and transmitted to other group members through leaders, the mass media, or other individuals. (p. 3)

As earlier discussed concerning the 1983 debacle, the same logic of betrayal could be applied to the 1991 coup attempt by Riek Machar against John Garang, which also led to the massacre of over 2,000 civilians in the latter's hometown of Bor (Wild, Jok, & Patel, 2018, p. 3). Although Garang died in July 2005, the emotions of the events of 1991 still linger among the surviving members of the SPLM. That explains why Salva Kiir consistently and angrily refers to the 1991 coup as accentuated by the events of the NLC meeting of December 14, 2013. The Honourable Garang Atem (personal conversation, March 18, 2018) attributed this conundrum to lack of reconciliation since the second civil war ended in 2005 and stated: "As a result, the grievances of past conflicts like that of 1983 and 1991 still manifest in today's conflicts."

Halperin et al. (2014) stated that the emotion of anger "arises when the actions of the outgroup are perceived as unjust and as deviating from acceptable norms" (p. 4). Brader and Marcus (2013) also stated that "anger is a particularly powerful mobilizing force that motivates people to take risky, confrontational, and punitive actions" and that it "...emerges in situations when people are threatened or find obstacles blocking their path to reward" (p. 16). The threat faced by the president in 2013 was that of removal from power, compounded by the memory of the 1991 coup. Given that background, President Kiir's announcement, after the incident of December 15, 2013—that Riek Machar had attempted a coup—should not have been a surprise. On the other hand, Riek Machar and other SPLM members opposed to President Kiir felt their dismissal from the party and the cabinet was unjust and not per the expected norms. The fighting that started among the presidential guards was a sign that the parties were politically estranged and had lost control of their emotions. As such, the war was inevitable.

Conclusion

Efforts to end the conflict in South Sudan have so far proven unsuccessful, despite concerted efforts by IGAD, AU, UN, and TROIKA. This article investigated the multiplicity of causes of the conflict at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Notably, the estranged political relationships within the SPLM leadership were situated at the secondary level, where they played a pivotal role in the sustenance of the conflict, given its psychological and emotional impact. Despite the SPLM polarity that first manifested in 1983, the party has all along maintained leadership in South Sudan and some cases showing hope. For example, after the 1991 Nassir coup attempt, the SPLM successfully held its first-ever convention in 1998 in Chukudum, formalizing and re-energizing its existence as a political entity with a

civil administration and more substantial appeal in Southern Sudan (Rolandsen, 2007, p. 5). However, the latest round of conflict that flared in December 2013 could be a defining moment for the future of the SPLM and the political dispensation in South Sudan at large.

Scholars have overwhelmingly identified power struggle, which began to manifest during preparations for elections that were due in 2015, as the major cause of the outbreak of the civil war, while others referred to civil war legacies as being the underlying cause. However, efforts to curb the conflict so far remain elusive. Although the findings in this article generally agree with the findings in previous literature on the immediate and historical causes of the conflict, what does seem clear is that previous literature is limited about the nexus between its multi-causal effects. In this article, the power struggles, attempted coups, and elections disputes are factors that stem from primary unresolved underlying historical causes, precipitated by the fragile relationships as a secondary cause. The historical conflicts in the SPLM are the primary causes of the civil war, representing a continuum of disputes and conflicts that occurred between 1983 and 2013. The conflicts have left the parties estranged and have incrementally inflicted profound psychological and emotional impact on the leaders tending towards fear, anger, bitterness, distrust, and the urge for revenge. The negative emotions from the estranged relationships incite power struggles and ethnic violence. The multiple causes, together, form the core of the conflict, but at the centre, negative emotions sustain the conflict and whip power struggles leading to violence.

As reflected in the ARCSS and R-ARCSS, the failure to address the linkages in the various levels of the conflict has proven to be a major obstacle to sustainable peace dividends. For example, addressing the power struggles through a power-sharing agreement without making provisions for addressing the underlying tensions and animosity among the conflict parties resulted in the collapse of ARCSS. A question that stands out is whether R-ARCSS will succeed where its predecessor failed. Despite renewed hope, cracks of failure are beginning to show in R-ARCSS as the parties are yet to form the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), several months into the agreement (The East African, 2019). The refusal of Riek Machar to return to Juba, citing security concerns, is a testament of the deep distrust that exists among the parties (AfricaNews, 2019).

“Lack of trust” is a term used severally by the mediators and the conflict parties alike. The distrust, embedded in the estranged political relationships, has periodically manifested, with devastating consequences, from the beginning of the second civil war in 1983 to the current conflict. Ironically, R-ARCSS, has no mechanism for trust-building among the

conflict parties, a process that goes hand in hand with the relationship building. Chapter V of R-ARCSS, apart from limiting conflict legacies to 2005, overlooks the intra-SPLM disputes that ignited the conflict in the first place. Having identified the primary, secondary, and tertiary causes of the conflict—going beyond the formation of the TGoNU to equitable relationships and trust among the conflict parties—is the recommended approach that would form the basis for sustainable agreements and peace. The article, therefore, recommends that further research on the conflict focus on mechanisms that address the estrangement in political relationships and trust-building within the conflict parties. However, it should be noted that issues of estrangement, distrust, and emotions are delicate, intricate and require acknowledgement, consent, vulnerability, and cooperation of the concerned parties to resolve (Fisher et al., 2000, p. 6).

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