

Avoiding One-Party Rule in South Sudan

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World's newest country faces challenge of establishing democracy that includes all factions.

As the Republic of South Sudan embarks on establishing itself as an independent state, analysts are concerned that the ruling party's domination of parliament and its close association with the military will hinder progress towards democracy.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement, SPLM, the political wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, SPLA, which fought a 20-year war against the north, has held a 70 per cent majority in the South Sudan government since a landmark peace agreement was signed in 2005.

That deal, known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA, set out a roadmap which was completed in January this year with a referendum on independence, leading to South Sudan's formal secession from the north on July 9.

Since the CPA was signed, the SPLM has sought to dominate politics in South Sudan at the expense of other factions. Its leader Salva Kiir was elected president of the semi-autonomous entity in 2005 and again in 2010. He continues as head of state of an independent South Sudan.

A few days before independence, South Sudan's parliament approved a new version of the interim constitution which in theory should have contained only minor adjustments to take account of the country's new status. But SPLM dominance, and the exclusion of other parties from the drafting process, produced a document that grants the president broad new powers to dissolve parliament, appoint and remove state governors, and declare war or a state of emergency without prior approval of parliament.

The trend towards one-party domination alarms many Sudan-watchers, who argue that it will not lead to stability over the long term.

According to David Anderson, professor of African politics at Oxford University, the SPLM "might have to learn that it is not a bad thing to have two or three other parties out there who are represented in your parliament. If they insist on maintaining a system that is so dominated by the SPLM when there is so much dissatisfaction with the SPLM, I think conflict is almost inevitable."

The Brussels-based International Crisis Group expressed similar views in a report issued this month, saying, "The SPLM must recognise that a genuine multi-party system is not a threat to its power, but a long-term investment in stability."

SPLM leaders "must avoid a 'winner-takes-all' mindset and view the appointment of a broadly representative government not as appeasement alone, but as recognition of Southern Sudan's pluralist character", the report said.

The SPLM is dominated by members of the Dinka ethnic group, and its differences with other southern parties are not just about politics; they also reflect historical rivalries with the communities those political forces represent.

Political and ethnic divisions in South Sudan have resulted in a plethora of groups opposed to the SPLM – up to 20, according to some estimates.

"The other tribes are feeling increasingly marginalised," Olivia Warham, a director at Waging Peace, a group that campaigns against abuses in Sudan and central Africa, said.

Although the other groups have challenged the SPLM by military as well as political means, they have no common, coherent strategy, and are at risk of being marginalised from the institutions of government, raising questions about the future of democracy in the south.

"They [opposition groups] are not actually effective in terms of mobilising their supporters," Hafiz Mohammed of the London-based advocacy group Justice Africa said. "They are weak. This is why the SPLM is dominating everything – and that is not a healthy environment for democracy."

Fouad Hikmat, Sudan advisor with the International Crisis Group, said these other political forces enjoy limited appeal

"The other parties, during the war [with the north] and during the CPA, didn't expand and incorporate to include people from different tribes and different regions," he said. "These are not political parties. These

are defectors.... some SPLA commanders whom the SPLM refused to put up as candidates during the elections, or [who] are contesting the outcomes of the elections, so they took up arms and wound up fighting.”

In the 2010 presidential election, Kiir’s sole challenger was Lam Akol, who leads one of the more significant opposition groups, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – Democratic Change, SPLM-DC, which is a splinter group from the original SPLM. An official with the United Nation mission in Sudan, speaking on condition of anonymity, told IWPR this was symptomatic of the lack of a credible opposition.

He added that it sometimes seemed that “every individual person has his own group and is waging war against the government of South Sudan”.

Hikmat believes opposition groups will have to change if they are to be part of a democratic system.

“Some of them are going to be dissolved into others, some of them are going to grow bigger, and some might disappear,” he said.

In the meantime, however, the SPLM is under little pressure to give ground.

As Hikmat put it, “They got the CPA, they got the referendum, they managed the house, they got the independence. Are they going to allow themselves to become a minority? Are they going to allow themselves to be the weakest party? Are they going to allow themselves not to be in the driving seat? I think most of the answers to those questions are no. The SPLM would like to continue what they have been doing.”

Anderson noted that centralising power is a feature of new governments on the African continent, adding, “If you look at other post-liberation governments in Africa and elsewhere, autocratic tendencies are the norm, so militaries that become governments have a tendency to be undemocratic.”

In the case of South Sudan, this risk is especially high given that the ruling party’s military arm, the SPLA, has become the national army, yet the distinction between the two remain blurred.

“There is no cadre of elite politicians separate from a cadre of militia leaders. They are the same people, and that makes some of them very bad politicians,” Anderson said. “It is a post-liberation government, so it’s basically a military government masquerading as a democratic government, and it will be that way for the next decade, never mind the next year.

“The reality on the ground is how do you deal with that, and how do you turn soldiers into good representatives of their people?”

Hafiz Mohammed says the political party must make a decisive break with its old military wing.

“The SPLM has to disassociate itself with the SPLA, and they have to turn the SPLA into a national army which is not linked to a top political party, because you cannot have a party that has an army in a democracy,” he said, adding that the next step would be to “include some of the rivals of the SPLM – the other groups which have armies – in this army. And this army has to disassociate itself with the SPLM, the political party.”

In a speech on independence day, July 9, President Kiir offered an amnesty to all rebel groups, something which the UN official interviewed by IWPR said was a step in the right direction.

“He called them to come and join the government, not in the sense of being the actual government big shots, but at least they have to come and contribute to the development of South Sudan,” the official said.

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