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INTERNATIONAL ACTORS AND THE IMPACT OF VIOLENT CONFLICTS ON DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH SUDAN: RETHINKING THE NARRATIVE

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Abstract
The conflict in South Sudan since December 2013 has devastated the lives of the majority of South Sudan people. It has killed tens of thousands, placed nearly a third of the population at risk of famine and ravaged key parts of the country. Against the backdrop of historical and narrative approaches by scholars and practitioners, the roles of international actors and the impact of violent conflict in South Sudan is yet to be contextually situated. While some see the causes of Africa's problem as economic and linked to poverty, debt and structural adjustment programs from the international financial institutions, political and governance-related factors, others could relate it as the artificially carved African boundaries by which many regard it as a colonial creation that caused frequent confrontations as a form of interstate conflict. The historical trajectory of ethnic divide and political identity in South Sudan brings to fore the germane question of decolonization within the context of democratic values and ideals.

This study, 'roles of international actors and the impact of violent Conflicts on the democratic development in South Sudan: Rethinking the narrative' is focused on a critique of the roles of international actors in the South Sudan conflict. The argument in this study seeks to advance knowledge with a paradigm shift from the parochial focus on international bodies as solutions to violent conflict situations while situating democracy within the context of decolonization. The study seeks to evaluate the source of recourse and relapse to violent conflict in spite of several conflict resolution and mitigation strategies and attendant impact of violent conflict on the democratic development in South Sudan.

The study is exploratory with the use of secondary data and archival materials. The study will use qualitative measures in gathering data as it depends on secondary sources of data collection such as written text, archival materials, journals and online sources.

Keywords: International actors, violent conflict, democracy, democratic development, South Sudan.

Background

Since its independence, South Sudan has faced severe internal conflicts that continue to undermine its stability and democratic aspirations. The 2013 civil war and subsequent clashes have killed tens of thousands, displaced millions, and devastated the country's political and economic foundations. The influence of international actors—including the United Nations, regional bodies like the African Union, and powerful foreign states—has played a complex role in both escalating and attempting to mitigate these conflicts. This paper examines how these external influences intersect with South Sudan's internal struggles, exploring their effects on the country's democratic progress and overall stability. In 1997, the security council of the United Nations organization convened at the level of foreign ministers to consider the need for a concerted international effort to promote peace and security in Africa. It was observed that despite the progress achieved by some African states the number and intensity of armed conflict on the continent remained a matter of grave concern, requiring a comprehensive response and approach (Porter, E. et. al. 2005). Africa as a whole began to make significant economic and political progress in recent years, but in many parts of the continent progress remains threatened or impeded by conflict. Since 1970, more than 30 wars have been fought in Africa, the vast majority of them intra-state in origin. In 1996 alone, 14 of 53 countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflict, accounting for more than half of all war-related deaths worldwide and resulting in more than 8 million refugees, returnees and displaced persons. Ultimately, the consequences of those conflicts have seriously undermined Africa's efforts to ensure long-term stability, development, prosperity and peace for its people. This is the reality of Africa's recent past. It is the reality that must be confronted honestly and constructively by all concerned if Africa is to enjoy human security and economic opportunities needed.

Kwesi and Sarjoh (2009) view the West Africa's relative stability following a period of violent and protracted conflicts in the 1990s as being infested by increasing attack from a range of existing and emerging threats. These threats include military interventions in the political arena, constitutional or electoral manipulation, international criminal network, religious intolerance, communal violence and natural disasters (Kwesi & Sarjoh, 2009). Despite progress in consolidating democracy over the past two decades, a series of recent military coup and ethnic violence has raised questions about the state of democratic structures and confidence that are currently in place. These are issues that border on eroding confidence in democracy and democratic process on the African continent. According to Kwesi and Sarjoh;

> "West Africa's relative stability following a period of violent and protracted conflicts in the 1990s is under increasing attack from a range of existing and emerging threats. The emergence or re-emergence of certain trends, namely armed sub-state groups, small arms flows and the narcotics trade, could erode the stability that the region currently enjoys. More generally, much of the region is still waiting for a 'democratic dividend' despite the return to civilian rule and holding of periodic elections, the social and economic well being of the vast majority of people in the sub-region remain dire" (Kwesi and Sarjoh, 2004).

Kwesi and Sarjoh (2004) reveal the imminent dangers ahead with the re-emergence of certain trends such as armed sub-state groups, small arms flow and narcotics trade posing grievous challenges to states within the African continent and eroding stability.



Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011.

The conflict in South Sudan since December 2013 has devastated the lives of the majority of South Sudanese people. It has killed tens of thousands, placed nearly a third of the population at risk of farming and ravaged key parts of the country. In recent outbreak of attacks recorded in July, 2016, renewed clashes have led to killing of civilians and the exit of many foreigners. John (2008) believes that while some see the causes of Africa's problem as economic and linked to poverty, debt and structural adjustment programs from the international financial institutions, political and governance-related factors, others could relate it as the artificially carved African boundaries by which many regard it as a colonial creation that caused frequent confrontations as a form of interstate conflict (Nasir, 2014). Contrary to this believes, while some countries have gained independence from colonial government, such nations have remained relatively stable. The focus of this paper is to digress with a paradigm shift from the blame-game attributed to colonial creation as the bane of challenges and source of recurrent interstate conflict.

The people of South Sudan have suffered nearly two centuries of colonial rule under the Turko-Egyptian, the Mahdiya, the Anglo-Egyptian, and the post-independence northern regimes. Attention is only called here to the activities and policies of these colonial regimes which have contributed to the cleavage between the predominantly Muslim north and non-Muslim South (Girma, 1997). Existing attempts to assess national development and processes of democratization suffer from conceptual and measurement challenges. The significance of this important concept is what the paper explores.

While African nations as a whole have made significant strides in political and economic development, persistent conflicts in regions such as West and Central Africa reveal the fragility of these gains. Scholars like Kwesi and Sarjoh (2009) argue that threats including military coups, electoral manipulation, and armed groups continue to hinder democratic consolidation across the continent. In South Sudan, these threats are intensified by historical grievances, ethnic divisions, and a contested political system, creating conditions where peace and democracy remain elusive. Despite some international intervention, the peace process has struggled to address the underlying causes of conflict, raising questions about the effectiveness and intentions of these external forces.

This study therefore shifts from the typical attribution of African conflicts to colonial legacies alone. Instead, it delves into the active roles of international actors in South Sudan's ongoing conflict and democratic trajectory, critically assessing how these actors shape the nation's pursuit of peace, stability, and self-governance.

Conflict and its theoretical underpinning:

Conflict can be described as a condition in which identifiable group of human weather tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political, economic, cultural or otherwise are in conscious opposition to one or more other identifiable human group because these groups are pursuing what is seen to be incompatible goals.

More importantly, conflict arises from the interaction of individuals who have partly, incompatible ends, in which the ability of one actor to gain his ends, depends to an important degrees on the choice or decisions that other parties will take. Conflict could be violent on uncontrollable dominant or recessive, resolvable or insolvable under various sets or circumstances (Omotosho, 2004). Mohammed (2000) argues that Conflicts are inevitable wherever severe resources are unequally distributed among competitors and inequity is reflected in cultural and political relationship between groups. With regards to various issues in dealing with conflict, it is important to bear in mind not just overt, physical violence, but also the sometimes subtly disguised forms of structural and cultural violence (Adam, 2000). Conflict management in general and conflict resolution in particular, are almost entirely determined by our understanding of the composition of a conflict and not only by symptoms (Kotze, 2000).

Conflict is one characteristic of the human condition and exists at all levels of individual and group interaction. There are many theories that seek to explain why this is the case. Authors from the field of psychology have asserted that conflict in our lives is attributed to such things as frustration that leads to aggression (Fox & Spector, 1999), differences in gender (Rennison & Planty, 2003), presence of weapons or instruments of violence (Wagstaff, MacVeigh, Boston, & Scott, et al., 2003), social learning (Wareham, Boots, & Chavez, 2009), mental illness, drug and alcohol use (Van Dorn, Williams, Del-Colle, & Hawkins, 2009), lack of communication (Giles, 2007), cognitive dissonance (Zepeda, 2006), ego (Rangell, 1969), and the biology and chemistry of the body (Webb, 1992).

In the realm of political science, authors have asserted that power inequalities (Braumoeller, 2008), power shifts, uncertainty, appeasement (Powell, 1996), class conflict (Olson, 2010), limited resources (Obi, 2010), rational choices (Fearon, 1995), or culture (Bhandar, 2008), all could play a factor in conflict. In the field of religious study, scholars view conflict distilled down to its simplest proximate cause, the interaction of good versus evil in the hearts of humans (Nolan & Burleigh, 2012). Mediation literature has focused on conflict originating from people's tendency to undertake positional bargaining (Moore, 2003). Conflict exists as a component of the human condition for many different reasons, and, when conflict reaches extremes, it can become harmful to all those involved.

Insights from the international relations, psychology, and conflict resolution fields of study indicated that parties in conflict can employ various measures over time to promote the belief that, in the future, each will act in a mutually beneficial manner (Osgood, 1959; Raju, 4 2009; Stimson Center, 2011; Vick, 1988)

Conflict may be defined as a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. According to Schelling (1960), conflicts that are strategic are essentially bargaining situations in which the ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make (Schelling, 1960). Likewise, Deutsch (1973) believes that conflict exist whenever incompatible activities occur…… one party is interfering, disrupting, obstructing, or in some other way making another party's action less effective (Deutsch, 1973).

Methodology and theoretical architecture of the study

This study relies on secondary data to examine the influence of international actors on South Sudan's conflict and democratic development. Data was collected from diverse sources, including reports from the United Nations, the African Union, and various non-governmental

organizations, as well as relevant academic literature and historical accounts. The selection criteria emphasized sources that provided insights into the role of international intervention, internal governance challenges, and socio-political dynamics in South Sudan. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes related to external influence, conflict factors, and democratic progress. This method enabled a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between international actors and South Sudan's internal landscape.

This study's theoretical framework draws on dependency theory and realist perspectives in international relations to analyze the role of international actors in South Sudan. Dependency theory provides a lens for understanding how external actors—such as foreign governments, international financial institutions, and non-governmental organizations can impact the political autonomy nd development trajectory of a post-conflict state like South Sudan. Additionally, realist perspectives underscore the strategic motivations behind foreign interventions, where international actors may prioritize their national interests over genuine demo-cratization.

By applying these theoretical approaches, this study examines how the involvement of international actors both supports and constrains democratic progress in South Sudan, highlighting the complex power dynamics at play. This framework guides the study's exploration of the motives, impacts, and limitations of international influence, positioning these theories as essential tools for interpreting the conflict and political landscape.

Violent Conflicts in South Sudan- An economic appraisal:

Considering the impact of violent conflicts on the democratic development of South Sudan, there is the need for an economic appraisal. Statistically, there exist a negative relationship between economic development and violent conflict. Collier (2006) identifies the failure of economic development as the key root cause of conflict.

Southern Sudan faces serious development challenges, while many observers are of the opinion that it will take years to see sustainable economic growth. Among the main challenges include the absence of good infrastructure, skilled labor, heavy dependence on oil revenue and corruption in the education sector, important progress has been made over the years, while other sectors of the economy remain far behind. Transportation is a major problem due to lack of major roads, and the only major airport, with limited capacity, is in the regional capital, Juba. Southern Sudan is land-locked, making a negotiated agreement important for the exportation of its oil through Sudan's pipeline. Many Southern Sudanese do not have access to electricity supply.

However, poor countries are not doomed or rather more predisposed to conflict than wealthier nations. While countries like Namibia has remained relatively unperturbed, Syria has been confronted with an overheated polity and imbroglio, which has abruptly denied thousands of people the right to live. Similarly, Gurr (1967) believes that political violence is a product of people's frustration over their living conditions. This can be seen from the Arab uprising, Tunisian conflict, and Iraq's war against armed groups, Egypt crises, Syria uprising, Libya revolution, civil war in Ivory Coast, and others.

It is not the level of material welfare in itself that determines conflict, but rather the extent to which the level of welfare is perceived as unjust. A situation where lot of expectation has been placed on the government and deprivation is experienced in relation to past conditions; when conditions have worsened over time, this

is termed decremental deprivation which is capable of engendering violent conflict.

Poor economic performance or inequitable development has resulted in near-permanent economic crises for some states, greatly exacerbating internal tensions and greatly diminishing their capacity to respond to those tensions. In some African countries painful structural adjustment programs have led to a significant reduction in social spending and consequent reduction in the delivery of many of the most basic social services. Especially when this is coupled with a perception that certain groups are not receiving a fair share of the diminishing resources, the potential for conflict is evident.

Paris(2004:1), for instance, notes that civil wars accounted for 94% of all armed conflicts in the world in the 1990s and that between 1989 and 1999 at least 14 peace building missions were launched to consolidate peace in Angola, Cambodia, Bosnia, Croatia, Guatemala and El Salvador, among others.

Also, the United Nations has launched over 55 peace operations since 1945, of which over 80% began after 1989 and at least 30% have been under way since 2003 (DOBBINS 2003:88).

The recent conflict in South Sudan has been polarized beyond a tussle for power while it transcends into an ethnic slide, putting the country on an edge of total collapse. South Sudan's conflict has been rooted in several factors such as economic backwardness, ethnic violence and other factors.

The Stockholm international peace research institute (SIPRI) 2002:65) notes Africa's unenviable record of 19 of the total of 57 armed conflicts across the globe between 1990 and 2001.

Democracy and democratic development

The term democracy like most concepts in social science lacks consensus over a precise single dentition. Akindele (1987) illustrated that several scholars and philosophers such as Rousseau, Locke, Lincoln and Mills have made attempts at defining the concept of democracy (Quoted in Ugwu, 2015). According to Elaigwu (2011) in Yio (2012), the concept of democracy is alien to Africa and needs to be domesticated to Africa's local conditions and targeted to her peculiar problems. He went further to define democracy as:

> "A system of government based on the acquisition of authority from people; the institutionalization of the rule of law; the emphasis on the legitimacy of rules; the availability of choices and cherished values (including freedom); and accountability in governance" (Quoted in Ugwu, 2015).

The definition identifies the principles of democracy and further illustrates the most important element of element of democracy which resides sovereignty in the people. As argued by Yio (2012), from the Athenian perspective, democracy is viewed as "government by the people with full and direct participation of the people. Huntington (1996) believes that political a political system is democratic when it is characterized by the following; if its most powerful decision collective decision makers are chosen through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population are eligible to vote.

Essien (2010) is of the opinion that we live in world of pluralism, diversity and inter dependence, while the issues of 'democracy', 'good governance' and concomitantly, 'development' have dominated political, social and economic discourse (Dada, Udoaka and

Oshim, 2013). Originating from the Millennium Declaration produced by the United Nations (UN), at the international, regional and domestic levels, concerted efforts are being made by the way of standard setting, towards achieving the goals of democracy, good governance and development.

There is no generally acceptable definition for democracy, partly because over the years, different forms of democracy have emerged. Consequently it has been stated that 'democracy can be understood as an ideology, a concept of a theory'. Lipset (1963) defines democracy as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the larger possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office.

Stephens (2005) argues that recent work on democratization has revived the notion developed by de Tocqueville in his discussion of the role autonomously organized social groups in the sustaining of American democracy, namely, that a strong or dense civil society is favorable for the development and sustenance of democracy. This clearly identifies the major source of violent conflict and absence of democratic development in South Sudan which can be attributed majorly to a spill-over effect of power tussle and ethnic dominance leading to the separation of South Sudan from Sudan. Democratic development in South Sudan has failed to attain its proper height as well as deliver dividends to South Sudanese due to a recurring trend of violent conflict since independence.

Identifying the Root Causes of the South Sudan Conflict and International Actors' Role

1. Historical Context and Root Causes

South Sudan's path to nationhood is deeply entwined with protracted struggles for autonomy and independence. The long-running civil war with the north, driven by ethnic, religious, and economic divisions, left the country with some of the lowest human development indicators globally. Jok (2011) observed that despite its substantial landmass, South Sudan's development has been stunted by decades of war and neglect, leaving it vulnerable to inter-ethnic and political conflicts.

The newly independent state inherited unresolved tensions, including a multiplicity of ethnic groups—around 64 in total—that vary significantly in political influence and demographic size. This diversity, while a potential asset, has often driven political fragmentation, as ethnic groups like the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, and others vie for representation and resources in a nascent political landscape.

2. Ethnic Diversity and Political Struggles

Ethnic divisions in South Sudan are a significant source of internal conflict. The longstanding Dinka-Nuer rivalry, for instance, reflects deeper historical grievances, resource competition, and political disenfranchisement. Scholars such as Samson (2010) argue that tensions between the Dinka and Nuer, exacerbated by competition over resources and regional interventions, have led to recurring violent clashes. In the early 1990s, these tensions erupted in "Emma's War" within the SPLM, pitting John Garang's predominantly Dinka faction against Nuer-led groups under leaders like Riek Macher. This split marked a defining moment, revealing underlying divisions that continue to destabilize South Sudan's political environment.

The political structure in South Sudan often mirrors a “winner-takes-all” system, as indicated by the 1998 UN Secretary-General's report, where political office confers not only governance but also access to resources, patronage, and social status. This system

incentivizes a zero-sum approach to politics, where gaining power equates to exclusive control over wealth and influence. The competition for such high stakes has sustained inter-group rivalries and hindered efforts toward national unity.

3. Regional and International Influence on Conflict

The complex dynamics of South Sudan's conflicts are further influenced by external actors with competing agendas. IGAD and neighbouring countries have at times supported peace initiatives; however, their conflicting national interests often disrupt a unified approach. This fragmentation among regional actors has weakened the peace process, as countries prioritize their geopolitical interests rather than a coordinated strategy for stability in South Sudan.

International actors, including the United Nations, have played critical roles in supporting peace efforts, yet their approach often emphasizes temporary power-sharing solutions rather than addressing fundamental issues like ethnic inequality and fair resource distribution. According to Kuol (2018), the UN's interventions have tended to focus on short-term stability, leaving core socio-political issues largely unaddressed. The international community's lack of a cohesive approach, combined with a focus on power-sharing agreements, has sometimes perpetuated the cycle of violence rather than fostering sustainable peace.

4. Need for a Unified, Strategic Approach

Addressing South Sudan's challenges requires not only diplomatic support but also a concerted effort to tackle governance, economic instability, and ethnic divisions. A stronger, more strategic approach from both regional and international actors could foster a more lasting peace by targeting the root causes of conflict rather than merely negotiating power arrangements. For sustainable peace, international support must transcend temporary political solutions, focusing instead on inclusive governance, equitable resource sharing, and building trust among South Sudan's diverse ethnic groups.

Violent conflicts and democratic development in South Sudan

The conflict that began in December 2013 indeed stemmed from political disagreements, particularly between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar. While the initial political dispute was not solely about ethnicity, the situation quickly escalated, leading to widespread violence that had ethnic dimensions, impacting various communities across the country. The accusations of a coup and the subsequent violence indeed led to a tragic cycle of retaliatory attacks between the Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups. This not only resulted in significant loss of life but also caused widespread displacement, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the country. The situation has had severe lasting impacts on South Sudan's development, democratic values and stability, as ongoing violence and insecurity continue to hinder efforts for peace and recovery.

The fighting in South Sudan persisted for over 20 months, despite efforts by regional mediators from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to facilitate peace negotiations. While both warring parties intermittently reaffirmed their commitment to a ceasefire established in January 2014, they frequently breached the agreement. In May 2014, they reached a tentative agreement to form a transitional government, but could not finalize its composition and responsibilities. After several missed deadlines and the threat of international sanctions, including a potential arms embargo, the parties eventually signed a peace agreement in August 2015. However, President Kiir signed the deal more than a week after opposition leader Machar, expressing reservations and labeling the agreement as

divisive and a threat to South Sudan's sovereignty.

The ongoing conflict highlights the complexities of the situation in South Sudan, where the formation of a unity government has not translated into lasting peace. The violence in areas like Wau and the greater Equatorial region underscores the underlying grievances of local communities, who feel marginalized and attacked by both the military and allied militia. Issues such as land grabs and extrajudicial killings contribute to widespread insecurity and displacement. Additionally, the decree by President Kiir in 2015, which increased the number of states from 10 to 28, has likely intensified ethnic divisions and competition for resources. This redistricting has altered the demographic landscape, exacerbating existing tensions and making it easier for anti-government factions to gain support from disillusioned local populations. Moving forward, addressing these grievances and fostering genuine dialogue among communities may be essential for achieving sustainable peace in the region.

Conclusion/Recommendations

There is the need for a bottom-up participatory approach in resolving long term grievances among affected parties to the conflict. This approach must be home-grown and internally-owned which will ensure sustainability. Trust building measures further strengthens the joint-problem solving strategy as a conflict handling style in peace process. It is obvious that South Sudanese have lost confidence in all the various approaches at providing sustainable peace in the country.

There is the need to adopt the 'soft' leadership style. This style focuses more on co-opting parties to the conflict rather than coercing them through pressure, threats or sanctions which is a hard leadership style (Nye, 2010).

Addressing these issues will require a concerted effort to develop a more cohesive strategy for both incentives and penalties. This could involve:

· ***Increased Coordination:*** Greater coordination among regional and international actors to present a united front and align their strategies.

· ***Credible Enforcement Mechanisms:*** Implementing more effective and credible enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with the ARCSS and hold violators accountable.

· ***Enhanced Diplomatic Pressure:*** Applying consistent and robust diplomatic pressure to compel all parties to adhere to the Agreement.

· ***Addressing Conflicting Interests:*** Navigating and reconciling conflicting regional interests to enable a more effective collective response.

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