

## **John Garang's Vision for a "New Sudan" – A Contemporary Perspective**

Irit Back

It was during the 1980s that John Garang, the visionary leader of the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) cautioned: "It is often forgotten that the Sudan is not just north and south. The Sudan is also west, east, and center, no matter what definitions you wish to attach to these labels... All patriots must appreciate the reality that we are a new breed of Sudanese; we will not accept being fossilized into sub-citizens in the 'Regions'."<sup>1</sup> His vision for a "New Sudan" included not only a warning, but also a solution to Sudan's fundamental problems, which, as he envisioned it, involved a new political dispensation in which all Sudanese are equal stakeholders irrespective of their race, ethnic affiliation, gender, etc. The other option, he stated, was to divide the country.<sup>2</sup> In many respects, Garang's "New Sudan" vision was not only utopian but also contradicted his own aims as the leader of a movement that was struggling for separation from the Khartoum-based central government. Yet, Garang's vision included a very precise observation regarding fundamental problems of deprivation, exclusion, and underdevelopment of the periphery, and the widening gaps between it and the center. As such, it seems that this vision is still relevant for understanding contemporary problems (and perhaps some of their potential solutions) not only in Sudan, but also in the recently independent state of South Sudan.

As the autocratic leader of the SPLM/A since its founding in 1983, Garang spearheaded the negotiations between the North and the South that resulted in the January 9, 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), ended the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005), and aimed at developing democratic

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<sup>1</sup> John Garang, *John Garang Speaks* (London: KPI, 1987), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> "Rebel leader Garang hails 'new Sudan' of peace and pluralism," *BBC Monitoring-Middle East*, January 10, 2005.

governance countrywide, including nominating a southerner as the Vice President of Sudan. Moreover, it established a timetable for southern Sudan to hold a referendum on the question of secession and the establishment of an independent state. Garang's ambivalence towards his ideological agenda was revealed at several points during the negotiating process. On the one hand, loyal to his vision of a "New Sudan," he insisted on integrating the new agreement between the south and the north into a comprehensive solution for all of the regions of Sudan, and particularly for Sudan's western region, Darfur, where a large-scale civil war was raging at the time. Garang even proposed that 10,000 SPLA troops join the African Union's peacekeeping force in Darfur. The central government's swift rejection of Garang's proposal was proof of its reluctance to expand the peace process to other parts of Sudan that also yearned to become equal stakeholders in the state.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, at the core of the CPA was the Machakos Protocol that was signed in July 2002. This protocol included the *quid pro quo* that in return for self-determination in the south, the SPLA/M would not resist the implementation of Islamic law (*shari'a*) in the north.<sup>4</sup> This demand was aimed at strengthening the legitimacy of the National Congress Party (NPC), the autocratic party that has ruled Sudan since the Islamist revolution of 1989 and that was largely responsible for widening the gaps between the privileged north and the other "sub-regions" of Sudan. In this sense, it could be claimed that Garang ceded his vision of a "New Sudan" in favor of the interests of his own people in the south.

Similar to the biblical tragedy of Moses, who saw the Promised Land before him but could not enter it, John Garang died in a plane crash on July 30, 2005, only several weeks after he was nominated as Sudan's first vice president. His death ignited a wave of riots and violence in the capital Khartoum and a number of other towns. Many of the participants in these riots were from Darfur and the Nuba Mountains,<sup>5</sup> and the riots confirmed fears in Khartoum that the south's secession would have a domino effect on other restive provinces, such as Darfur, Kordofan, and the Blue Nile, over which the government was determined to retain sovereign control.

Unfortunately, shortly after the declaration of the independence of South Sudan (on July 9, 2011), it became clear that many of the same issues that had torn the Sudanese state apart were now the inherited legacy of the newly born state of South Sudan. The attitudes of Salva Kiir Mayardit, Garang's successor as the

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<sup>3</sup> Irit Back, *Sovereignty and Intervention in Africa: Conflict Resolution and International Organizations in Darfur* (London: I B Tauris, 2015), pp. 37-38, 42.

<sup>4</sup> The implementation of *shari'a* (the Islamic Law) in 1983 throughout Sudan was a violation of the 1972 cease-fire agreement between the north and the south, and a main trigger for the second phase of the civil war that year.

<sup>5</sup> John Young, "John Garang's legacy to the peace process, the SPLM\A & the south," *Review of African Political Economy* 32:106, 536.

leader of the SPLM/A, and later the first president of South Sudan, were much narrower than Garang's. Salva Kiir's interests lied mostly in the internal unification of the emerging nation, and he did not show any concern for the fate of Sudan's other regions. These attitudes were popular among the South Sudanese, who mostly regarded the "New Sudan" vision as a vague concept that was not related to the aim of national independence for South Sudan.<sup>6</sup> Thus, 98 percent of the 2010 referendum voters chose independence over integration with Sudan. Yet, soon after independence it became clear that internal divisions and fissures were threatening to destroy the newly born South Sudan nation.

Indeed, two years after independence, internal divisions worsened and eventually turned into a humanitarian disaster. In mid-December 2013, internal tensions were exacerbated by a power struggle between President Salva Kiir and his deputy, former Vice President Riek Machar. After SPLM's ruling committee meeting ended in a political deadlock, shots were fired at the military's headquarters, and fighting erupted between government forces and those loyal to Machar and has steadily expanded ever since. This conflict has a clear ethnic character, as the two rivals represent the two primary ethnic groups in South Sudan: Kiir represents the Dinka, and Machar the Nuer. Yet, there is also a personal dimension to this conflict: the two have been struggling for political dominance since the early 1990s, and the competition between them intensified after Garang's death, and again after South Sudan attained independence.<sup>7</sup> The ensuing violence has severely damaged the new state: tens of thousands of people are believed to have been killed in the bloodshed. Of a total population of 12 million, 1.4 million people have been internally displaced, and nearly half a million have sought refuge outside the country. Moreover, almost the entire population of South Sudan is, to some degree, at risk of famine.<sup>8</sup>

Within Sudan, the continuation of the regional wars, either the well-known thirteen year war in Darfur, or the "forgotten wars," such as the one that has been escalating recently in the Blue Nile region,<sup>9</sup> are tragic evidence of the rejection of Garang's "New Sudan" vision. Sadly enough, the preference for military force and other coercive means instead of searching for ways to create a more equal and genuine distribution of power and wealth between the periphery and the center is characteristic not only of the ruling elites in Khartoum, but also

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 545-6.

<sup>7</sup> Alex de Waal, "The Price of South Sudan's Independence", *Current History*, May 2015:195.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: "Uprooted by Conflict: South Sudan's Displacement Crisis," *International Rescue Committee*, November 2014; [U.N. Secretary-General's report on South Sudan](#) (covering the period from 14 April to 19 August 2015).

<sup>9</sup> For an elaborate explanation of the developments in this area, see: "[Blue Nile-Sudan Forgotten War](#);" see also, the documentary film, "The Beats of Antonov," which tells the story of this war through the prism of Sudanese music.

of Garang's old echelon in Juba. Thus, despite international, continental, and regional pressures to solve the conflict and promote peace-building and development, South Sudanese factions continue to battle one another and the circle of violence continues into the present.<sup>10</sup>

On the brighter side, however, both in Sudan and South Sudan many people are refusing to be ruled "as the personal fief of limited number of corrupt, officialized warlords."<sup>11</sup> In this sense, opposition forces, which are active both in politics and in civil society, are seeking a more equitable distribution of power and wealth in both countries. This could be an encouraging sign that Garang's utopian vision of a New Sudan, and hopefully New South Sudan, is still alive, and that perhaps some parts of it will one day be realized.

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<sup>10</sup> "[Heavy fighting resumes in Juba between rival South Sudanese forces](#)," *Sudan Tribune*, July 10, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Gerard Prunier, "South Sudan's civil war: towards a progressive analysis," *Open Democracy*, June 16, 2014, p. 7. It should be mentioned that although Prunier attributed this observation to South Sudan's ruling elite, it is relevant for Sudan's ruling elite as well.