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Insurgencies in South Sudan: A Mandatory Path to Build a Nation?

by Marc-Andre Lagrange

The 2010 elections in Sudan were more than just a formal exercise for the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLM/A). It was for both of them the ultimate test of the capacity of SPLM to turn from an armed insurgent/liberation movement into a government supported by a national army and set the base for separation from Khartoum regime. Immediately after its first elections, the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) had to face two small scale insurgencies in Jonglei State. Led by General George Athor and David Yaw Yaw, those two insurgencies, despite their apparent limited scale, had a serious destabilizing potential for the first elected government of South Sudan.

South Sudan may seem as united to some, but for observers, South Sudan is all but united. The federal system in place does not grant to the central government a full approbation and support from the various ethnic groups and post Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) political parties issued from the armed groups. In fact, federation seems to be the only possible solution to build a modern State and government in this constellation of armed ethnic groups and semi political armed groups which constitute the population and political scene of South Sudan. Part from fighting against Khartoum, most of them have limited, if not opposite, common objectives and visions of independent South Sudan.

Less than four years after the CPA was signed and war with North ended, semi-autonomous South Sudan was already on the verge to fall into civil war. According to the United Nations, in 2009, inter and intra ethnic conflicts claimed more lives than Darfur fighting. Elections were then not just a mile stone to prove the capability of both North and South to organize large scale electoral process. It was a necessity to build minimal cohesion among South and set the foundations of the post referendum Southern institutions.

In that perspective, even small scales insurgencies conducted by a handful of renegade soldiers are major challenges. Any mistake would discredit GoSS among the Southern population.

Part of the challenge resided into the fact that the Sudan People Liberation Army is not a homogenous army but rather a conglomerate of former armed militias with combating Khartoum as unique common point. While the differentiation between various political parties was clear, the real test laid in the SPLA capacity to manage the various political allegiances of the armed groups it is composed of.

As the political process of independence in South Sudan is not yet complete, there is no real distinction between the SPLA, the SPLM and the Government of South Sudan. First of all, GoSS had to handle a political hiccup that could destabilize the newly elected government and revive the internal political tensions in a not so united South Sudan population. Secondly:

respond to an internal threat with a divided under construction National Army. The faced problematic was then much bigger than just crushing several insurgent groups and avoiding falling in the endless Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo turmoil. It was also a “grandeur nature” test of the coming post referendum challenges that GoSS will face to avoid the premature collapse of this country to be.

The Roots of Discontentment

If Athor and Yaw Yaw turned against GoSS and took the arms in the name of the people to protest against the SPLM “frauds” during 2010 elections, those two insurrections have little in common.

Athor’s movement takes its roots in both ethnical and popular support. SPLA combatant of the first hours, after CPA signature George Athor became Upper Nile then Jonglei division commander and finally Deputy Chief of Staff for the SPLA Political and Moral Orientation. He is quite representative of the post CPA SPLA top officers military and political evolution. Numerous rumors are accusing him to be involved into weapons smuggling, traffic of influence and misappropriation of funds both in Jonglei and Upper Nile. He was also deeply involved in the White Army bloody disarmament in 2006¹.

Originally from the Dinka ethnic group, his fief is located in Khorfulus County, one of the territories ravaged by the Nuer during the SPLA-Nasir raise up against John Garang SPLA in the 90. The area is also a contested grazing area between Nuer and Dinka. Therefore it becomes difficult to separate the political from the ethnical in George Athor popular support. During the electoral campaign, Athor played wildly those blurt carts, putting accent on insecurity to rally both youth and elders². Unsurprisingly, the first military action of its supporters, in March 2010, has been to attack the SPLA camp on Dolied Hill. Dolied Hill is at the same time the most contested land between Nuer and Dinka of Upper Nile and Jonglei and the symbol of the defeat of the Nuer White Army by Athor troops³. It is very difficult to evaluate the reality of Athor’s military power, depending sources his forces are evaluated between several hundred to several thousand combatants.

It’s almost at the same period that David Yaw Yaw rebellion started in Pibor County in Southern part of Jonglei State. On May 21, Yaw Yaw and his partisans launched an attack on Pibor city before being quickly chased out from their positions into Boma National Park by the SPLA troops. Unlike George Athor, Yaw Yaw is a civilian from the Murule ethnic group. Before taking arms, Yaw Yaw was working as civil servant with the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. As Athor, he was an unsuccessful independent candidate during the elections. Unlike Athor, his group is evaluated, at the most, up to 50 combatants and his popular support is limited to a sub ethnical division inside the Murule ethnic group. Just like for the Athor popular support, Yaw Yaw popular support is rooted in the SPLA exactions during the 2009-2010 civilian forced disarmament. In that perspective, the two insurgencies are the product of the GoSS incapacity to make peace attractive, in the incapacity of SPLA to no more act as a

¹ Small Arms Survey; HSBA armed groups George Athor, August 2010.

² Jonglei’s independent governor candidate pledges a U-turn to SPLM;
<http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article34291>, accessed 2 May 2010.

³ In May 2006, the SPLA troops commanded by George Athor confronted the Nuer youth White Army in Dolieb Hill. That forced civilian disarmament lead to over 1000 death among the White Army and 500 in the SPLA ranks. SPLA troops are also accused to have been looting the civilian properties and livestock at will with a total impunity from the GoSS.

predatory insurgent group. But more than the produce of the defiance between the populations and a government issue from a rebel group who fought in their name, those insurgencies are the produce of the structural unequal transfer of peace benefits inside a war thorn society inherent to post conflict transitional context.

But while Athor political claims and ambitions are national, Yaw Yaw's ones are limited to Pibor County⁴. And that is most probably the main difference between those two insurgencies. With its limited local economical and intra Murule ethnical problematic, Yaw Yaw insurgency is a disturbance for the GoSS while Athor political disagreement find its roots in a deep disagreement between the John Garang's New Sudan and Reich Machir's separatist supporters. Athor insurgency real stake is the 2011 referendum results and the fragile power sharing NCP and SPLM arrived previous the election. The premature redrew from the presidential race from SPLM has paved the road for the separation by clearly dividing the power between the two military powers present in Sudan.

Crushing the Insurgents:

GoSS first reaction was to negotiate with Athor in order to bring him back into the SPLM and the new government. It is difficult to establish who from Athor or Kiir did break negotiations first. Apparently Athor low popular support in Jonglei as a whole did influence GoSS decision to go for the hard line⁵. GoSS did not look for negociation with Yaw Yaw but targeted his political supports in the Juba Murule community. In order to isolate him, SPLA conducted several arrest among the military and political Pibor's Murule community in Juba⁶.

After isolating the two insurgent movements from their political support, SPLA launched a containment operation to physically isolate the insurgents groups. Athor found refuge in one of the most remote and less accessible parts of Jonglei, his fief of Khorfulus County, while Yaw Yaw found refuge in Boma National Park.

Insurgent counterstrikes were there again really different and revealing of their real dimensions. Yaw Yaw's partisans conducted operation on the road linking Bor and Pibor, the two main Jonglei cities, reducing the perception of his insurgency to banditry and taking off almost its entire political dimension. But still those actions had strong consequences on the NGOs capacity to provide basic services to the populations⁷.

Athor choose to shift the battle to the propaganda level and announced that he was in contact with another dissident SPLA colonel from Upper Nile. In order to create terror inside the civilian population, Athor also announced that he would attack Bor and gave an interview to Miraya Radio⁸.

In order to regain political weight, Yaw Yaw announced he was coordinating with Athor. If Athor publicly claim to have contacts with the insurgent group in Upper Nile, he allusively mentioned Yaw Yaw. Even, since SPLA conducted arrests in the Murule community in Juba,

⁴ Small Arms Survey; HSBA armed groups David Yau Yau, August 2010.

⁵ On the 11 counties of Jonglei, Athor won only in 1 for the Governor position.

⁶ Leaders from Murle community arrested in Juba; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35272> ; accédé le 2 juin 2010.

⁷ Attacks on staff force MSF to evacuate parts of Jonglei state; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35820>; July 31, 2010

⁸ Renegade general warns civilians to evacuate Bor town before attack; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35092>; Sunday 16 May 2010

Yaw Yaw almost disappeared from the media. In that extend, SPLA was very much successful in completely isolating Yaw Yaw.

Being incapable to turn his threats into reality, Athor finally accused SPLM to have spoiled the elections with fraudulent maneuvers and would spoil the referendum⁹. As insurgent group in Unity State was almost annihilated¹⁰ and Yaw Yaw fully isolated, SPLA decided to militarily address Athor's insurgency¹¹. But this offensive turned into several skirmish confrontations which did not turn into SPLA favor¹². Incapable to defeat Athor militarily, the SPLA started then a propaganda campaign to discredit him in accusing him to support the SPLM-DC and to receive support from Khartoum. The main proof of that support was revealed to the public through the arrest of a helicopter operated by a Russian crew coming from North¹³. Unlike the military offensive, that political and propaganda offensive prove to be very effective. Athor then lost a lot of his media support and finally coverage, giving space for GoSS and SPLM to impose the separatist agenda to a population already favorable to it. If populations and ethnic groups in South Sudan are not united, they are fully dedicated to the SPLA/M and the separation cause. But reducing Athor and Yaw Yaw to media silence did not resolve any of the problematic those two insurrections raised, it only gave to GoSS a larger maneuver space to address the upcoming discontent in Northern Bar El Ghazal¹⁴.

And Then Came the Referendum...

End of August 2011, at least for the public, insurgencies in Jonglei were fully under control. Athor was stuck in a corner, cut from his logistical and political support and his surrender was a question of time. Yaw Yaw was reduced to a bunch of bandits harassing the wild-life guards in Boma National Park and the stock piles of ammunitions brought by SPLA in Boma city were there to prove that it was seriously addressed¹⁵. SPLA/M had demonstrated their ability to address efficiently post-election security threat. The political gain was tremendous for GoSS who had managed to impose the responsibility of all elections disorders and frauds responsibility to North and Khartoum regime; while SPLA had gain its barrettes of National Army defending governmental interest¹⁶.

But in September, over and sudden, armed groups crossing the border of Jonglei to enter Easter Equatoria State started to be reported. After a complete chaotic two weeks of SPLA and UNMIS tracking a group of armed men between and handful and 3000 organized military troops,

⁹ Athor says SPLM "ruling clique" can rig referendum against people's choice; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35260>; accessed le 2 June 2010.

¹⁰ South Sudan army kills eight rebels in Unity State, pledges to crash them; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35280>; accessed le 3 June 2010; Southern Army clears post election rebellion in Unity state; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35332>; accessed 9 June 2010

¹¹ South Sudan army and renegade general clash in Jonglei State; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35414>; accessed 16 June 2010

¹² General Athor says none of his soldiers were captured by SPLA; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35430>; accessed 20 June 2010

¹³ GOSS Captures Militias Allied To Renegade General George Athor; <http://www.sudanradio.org/goss-captures-militias-allied-renegade-general-george-athor>; 11 August 2010; South Sudan captures Khartoum-destined helicopter with rebels on board; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35912>; Wednesday 11 August 2010

¹⁴ SPLA chief calls on General Nyuol to bury election differences; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article35447>; accessed 18 June 2010

¹⁵ interviews with humanitarian workers and United Nations staff.

¹⁶ The security situation in South Sudan is under control, the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) has said.; accessed 27 August 2010.

it was finally admitted it was most probably Yaw Yaw group. SPLA started to arrest any individual perceived as suspicious in Kapoeta town, the last main city on the road from Kenya to Boma.

Then, on October 6, Salva Kiir, the president of GoSS, offered his pardon to all renegade SPLM generals¹⁷. At the same time, GoSS opened peace talks with Yaw Yaw¹⁸. It quickly appeared that SPLA had in fact no control on the situation. The containment operation was a default response to SPLA internal turmoil. Insurgents had managed to impose themselves as major political actors and become a credible threat for the referendum. Stuck between an inefficient attrition military campaign and its incapacity to conduct in time the technical requirements to organize the 2011 referendum, the GoSS, despite winning the propaganda battle, had in fine lost the political war. In no time, GoSS lost at the same time his apparent political dominant position and credibility in his capacity to secure South Sudan. In the end, it is SPLA/M that defeated SPLA/M. Lost in their grand objective of achieving their liberation, SPLM and SPLA were not capable to unify around the need to build a solid State apparatus, offering their flanks to both Khartoum regime's wait and see delaying strategy against the referendum and internal fights.

Desperate to achieve a victory that will not be gained on a battle ground, the amnesty for all renegades appears as a last stand preemptive maneuver to sap Khartoum capacities to support internal armed opposition in South Sudan. By just surviving long enough, the insurgents have been able to take advantage of the SPLA/M imperious necessity to end the war and its absolute inexperience of political and diplomatic "passe d'arme" that is 2011 referendum. This allowed the insurgents to gain a political weight which is apparently in no ad equation with their military power¹⁹.

A Political Success?

While GoSS had primary managed to build the image of an established government by responding in a convincing manner to emerging insurgency, it apparently ended up in bringing it back to a dysfunctional group of bush rebels with little experience of governing a country. But this would be a very much on the surface understanding of the politic dynamics in South Sudan.

GoSS is not a strongly structured government with well establish up and running institutions. GoSS is a façade government established after a peace agreement which aim to settle a conflict. The political party in charge, the SPLM, is not either a unified political party with a unique political line. SPLM is the produce of two decades of civil war between North and South but also between southerners. What emerge from the 1994 Chukudum SPLM conference was a consensus between several political forces, including the North opposition Umma party. In 1991, Reik Machir, the actual vice president, with Lam Akol, the actual president of the SPLM-DC, launched an anti-John Garang and anti-Dinka offensive. That war was a South against South conflict that takes its roots in the ethnical enmities between Nuer and Dinka. In fact, many in South took arms against Garang's SPLA during the 90th. Not because of a political disagreement

17 South Sudan president pardons rebel army officers; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article36507>; accessed 7 October 2010

18 Peace talks in Jonglei's Pibor county stall after ambush kills 3 people; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article36505>; accessed 7 October 2010

19 South Sudan's renegade General Athor sets conditions for his return; <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article36654>; accessed 20 October 2010

on the cause but because of the internal Dinka based leadership. Garang's SPLA, as many other armed groups in Africa, was primary an ethnic based movement fighting for an ethnic cause before being national. Even after the 1994 Chukudum and the establishment of SPLA-United, SPLA remained a Dinka lead movement. The Nuer contribution in Nuba Mountain but also the SPLA-Nasir offensive, allowed Nuer to conquer power inside SPLA/M and then GoSS.

In fact, power inside SPLA/M and GoSS is shared between ethnic groups according their capacity to destabilize central government. In Eastern Equatoria State, the Toposa took over on the Acholy and Latuko, not because their representatives were the most popular and therefore the better placed to ensure SPLM a victory in the elections; but because they had the military capacity to threaten GoSS²⁰. In such perspective, by allowing GoSS to crush an insurgency, South Sudan ethnic powers would implicitly surrender to a central power; an unacceptable position for them.

In 2009, violence in Jonglei was the fact of the Nuers²¹. At that time, the Governor was a Dinka and the vice Governor a Nuer. Elections were internally organized by SPLM in order to "alternate" power between Dinka and Nuers. In the internal competition for domination inside SPLM between Nuer and Dinka, crushing Athor movement would have diminished the Dinka positions inside GoSS. In such perspective, it's not the referendum that was threatened but the core historical leadership of SPLA/M which was at stake in that insurgency. The amnesty given to Athor then has to be understood in maneuver from Kiir to preserve Dinka influence inside GoSS.

COIN is all about reestablishing state monopoly of violence. Failing to establish a practice of nonviolent political dialogue even inside SPLM will only open the path to a "Congolisation" of politics in South Sudan where political disagreement are solved with an AK and a bunch of cattle raiders. Politically, the Jonglei insurgencies management is a short term success for GoSS. It also proves how it is difficult for a former insurgent group to pass over ethnical dissensions and establish itself as a national political party. Ruling a State has a political cost that SPLM will have to pay one way or another if it wants to be able to avoid the collapse of South Sudan and build a sustainable administration.

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²⁰ In 2009, after an incident with the Kenyan security forces at the border point of Nadapal, Toposa (political leaders explained to Salva Kiir envoy that he abandoned them and they would turn back to Khartoum if GoSS would not put them in power. According to ICRC, at that time, the Toposa had a superior military capacity than SPLA in the area.

²¹ Who is behind Jonglei attack?; Tuesday 22 September 2009; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article32541> ; Lou Nuer vision and Jonglei's chaos; Friday 2 October 2009; <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article32648>

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