

Book Review: The Politics of Liberation: An Insider's View by Dr. Peter A. Nyaba, Fountain Publishers, Kampala 1997

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In this succinct yet substantive book, Dr. Peter Nyaba presents a detailed and informative insider's view of events from the inception of the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLM/A) in 1983 to the dramatic split in its ranks in 1991, and the tragic aftermath. Dr. Nyaba's honesty, integrity and commitment to the cause of southern Sudan are obvious throughout the book. To a great extent, the book reads as an atonement for his personal role in the events that led to the unfortunate split of the SPLM/A in 1991.

Dr. Nyaba does not try to whitewash the image of the SPLM/A. Much to the contrary, he is very critical of both the ideological and methodological shortcomings of the Movement. By exposing the Movement's internal contradictions, Dr. Nyaba hopes to contribute to a truly representative and democratic liberation movement.

The SPLM/A's Internal Contradictions. Both internal and external factors contributed to the 1991 split within the SPLM/A ranks. However, according to Dr. Nyaba, the internal contradictions of the Movement were more important than the external forces driving southern disunity. He notes that from its inception in 1983 until the split in 1991, the SPLM/A had very little tolerance for difference of opinion or internal criticism, and that the Movement "became obsessed with real or imaginary enemies of the revolution among its membership, especially the politicians and the intellectuals" (p. 49).

The SPLM/A leadership was virtually unaccountable for its mistakes and abuses of power, a culture of fear having developed around it. In addition, the manner in which SPLA recruits were trained was woefully deficient in terms of creating a politically educated following. The necessary levels of political education and ideological enlightenment were lacking in its training program, which emphasized rigorous, often brutal, physical training. As a result, according to Dr. Nyaba, SPLA soldiers were de-revolutionized, a circumstance that produced excessive militarization and the unleashing of immense brutality against civilian populations (pp.35-37). To counter this tendency, the SPLM/A should have placed more emphasis on non-military functions of the Movement, Dr. Nyaba argues. In particular, he argues, after liberating a particular area, the Movement should have instituted "democratic reforms: a popular justice system, a new system of education, health and veterinary services. It would have given the SPLM the

opportunity to prove itself to the people and to the world and, therefore, to build a solid popular power base making the SPLM/A the authentic representative of the people...the 'New Sudan' would have been born in the physical and objective reality of the people, allowing the SPLM/A to acquire political sovereignty and diplomatic recognition" (p.51)

Instead, the SPLM/A often "denigrated into an agent of plunder, pillage and destructive conquest" (p.52). This could have been mitigated, Dr. Nyaba argues, if soldiers had been given the proper "political training and education." Unfortunately, he does not elaborate with great particularity on the desirable content of such training and education.

These were some of the major internal factors that contributed to the 1991 split. However, as Dr. Nyaba points out, external forces also played an important role. Included among these were the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime's desire to divide and weaken the Movement, the hostility toward a strong SPLM/A from some elements within the NDA, from Egypt and from various foreign parties and individuals allied with the NIF (e.g., British financier Tiny Rowlands). The SPLM/A could have withstood these external pressures, however, had it not been beset by so many internal contradictions. Even so, most of the rank and file of the Movement remained loyal due to the more fundamental and overriding contradictions between the NIF and the South, according to Dr. Nyaba.

The 1991 Nasir "Coup" and Lessons Learned thereby. Dr. Nyaba's personal involvement in the Movement's 1991 split was motivated by what he confesses was his naïve trust in the stated desire of Lam Akol and Riek Machar to press for "democratization of the Movement." He claims to have had no idea that they would stage a "coup" against Dr. Garang, rather than merely press for internal reforms. However, a coup is exactly what they announced in the Nasir Declaration of August 28, 1991. Riek Machar broadcast the declaration via a radio message "addressed to all units of the SPLA," and on the BBC. According to Dr. Nyaba, it "was a political and military maneuver carefully calculated to snatch the leadership from Dr. John Garang" (p.74). This, along with their subsequent collaboration with the NIF regime, revealed to Dr. Nyaba the depths of Lam Akol's and Riek Machar's desire for personal power even at the expense of the liberation struggle.

The "coup" led to the creation of SPLM/A-United faction (later renamed the Southern Sudan Independence Movement/Army, SSIM/A). Most unfortunately, the split precipitated one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent South Sudan history, as the factions engaged in internecine fighting. Innocent civilians suffered tremendously as a consequence. It also helped the NIF regime to regain strategic towns in the South, notably in the oil rich areas, the implications of which we are well aware today. The SSIM/A, due to a lack of overwhelming southern support for the coup, inevitably found

itself collaborating politically and militarily with the NIF. Such treacherous collaboration caused significant moral and military setbacks in the war of liberation. Furthermore, it led to a southernization of the war, a development that benefited the NIF and other enemies of South Sudan while imposing tremendous costs on the South. And, most ironically, it led to the recreation within the SPLM/A-United (SSIM/A) of the very same internal contradictions that had plagued the SPLM/A and that Lam Akol and Riek Machar had claimed were the reason for their “coup”. Not surprisingly, SPLM/A-United (SSIM/A) soon degenerated into more “tribal or region-based splinter groups”.

The ultimate “result [was] what the NIF government had set out to achieve...dividing the liberation movement” and stalling the IGADD process with its dubious “peace from within” program (p. 130). According to Dr. Nyaba, the only advantage of the split was that it forced the SPLM/A’s leadership to reflect critically upon some of its mistakes:

“the coup...was probably a ‘blessing in disguise’ in that it helped to bring about the qualitative transformation of the SPLM/A...ironically, [it] stimulated renewal of the SPLM through the first National Convention in 1994, the SPLA senior officers’ conference, October 1995, the conference on civil society and civil authority in 1996. The emergence of the SPLM/A United, and later SSIM/A helped to cleanse the SPLM/A of opportunism and irresponsible ambition.”

Although I doubt that “opportunism and irresponsible ambition” have disappeared totally from the political landscape, many lessons undoubtedly were learned. Perhaps the greatest lesson learned is that, “[n]o war of liberation can be executed without the people. Nor are the people liberated. They must participate in the liberation process through their own conscientisation” (p.52, italics added). Had SPLM/A gotten this point prior to 1991, the devastating split might have been avoided. It is not too late to grasp this point, to the extent it has yet not been fully appreciated.

The Problematic National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Politics of Liberation concludes on a rather pessimistic note regarding the ability of the NDA (which includes the SPLM/A) to resolve the Sudanese conflict. Dr. Nyaba highlights the fragility of the alliance and stresses that southerners should not place too much hope in the sincerity of the northern opposition, given their record on the South. Moreover, the fact that the NIF “grew out of the bosom of the sectarian parties,” a fact that they rarely openly acknowledge, is another reason to be wary (p.173). Furthermore, the northern opposition still tends to dismiss the role of the SPLM/A in overthrowing the NIF, despite the fact that it is the SPLM/A that has committed itself militarily while the sectarian parties have been reluctant

to do so.

In short, Dr. Nyaba's view of the NDA differs radically from the northern opposition's view of it. He regards "the NDA not as a bridge to the formation of one secular democratic Sudan, but as a convenient forum for a peaceful dismemberment of the Sudan, and the formation of two separate, independent and sovereign entities" (p.174). [1] This view stems from his belief that an "NDA government in Khartoum, following the demise of the NIF, will not bring about secularism immediately....the sectarian parties may not accept the complete destruction of the system based on Islam and Arabism in the Sudan" (p.180).

Conclusion. I truly enjoyed reading *The Politics of Liberation* almost five years ago now. The lessons contained in the book are as relevant as ever, if not more so, at this critical juncture. Unfortunately, not all southern political players have learned from the painful experiences of 1991 and thereafter. There is still too much disunity, making it possible for those hostile toward South Sudan to exploit southern divisions with disastrous long-term consequences for the people of the South. Therefore, I hope through this book review to remind ourselves of the lessons so potently articulated by Dr. Nyaba.

Now that several years have passed since the book's publication, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

What specific measures have been taken to strengthen civil society and the respect for human rights by the SPLM/A?
How successful have such measures been?
How can southerners overcome the powerful internal and external forces of disunity for the sake of a common aim?
How might southerners as a group hold individual leaders politically accountable to the South for self-centered behavior that continues to impose deep and lasting harm on the entire community?
Do southern leaders sufficiently appreciate the damage caused to the liberation struggle by disunity? (Or is it still merely an intellectual exercise to think about this question?)

Perhaps Dr. Nyaba will write a new edition of *The Politics of Liberation* that addresses these weighty questions.

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