

Is a national dialogue the answer to South Sudan's quest for Peace?

Keynote speech at a public on the South Sudan National Dialogue Organised by the University on Governance and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

30th August 2017, Senate Building Makerere University



On May 22, 2017, South Sudan side other international diplomats President Salvar Kiir, flanked by re- launched the South Sudan National regional neighbour and Ugandan Dialogue process. To President Kiir, President, Yoweri Museveni along- the dialogue presents [a bottom-top](#)

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

UGANDA
SOUTH SUDAN

YUSUF KIRANDA

SEPT 2017

www.kas.de/uganda/en

[approach to address local grievances and political issues in the country](#). All 93 members of the dialogue committee were appointed by the president himself. The president's move towards a national dialogue follows successive failures at attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement of a catastrophic conflict that has rocked his country since December 2013, based on a fallout between [the president and his royalists on one side and forces royal to his former deputy, Riek Machar, on the other](#). The new initiative is not be seen as the first attempt on dialogue in South Sudan, internationally mediated talks in [Addis Ababa](#), [Nairobi](#) and [Entebbe](#) have all failed to yield much needed peace.

The idea of a national dialogue in South Sudan has attracted considerable optimism as it has raised

pessimism. Some see [viable hope](#) in the national dialogue initiative while the opposition [reportedly called the move "bogus."](#) Supporters of the dialogue see it as an opportunity to resuscitate failed peace talks whilst giving chance to all South Sudanese to participate in the process of bargaining for peace. On the other hand, pessimism towards the process is underlined by the fact it is remains a one-sided initiative, which is only yet to include protagonists from those opposed to Salvar Kiir's government. Whatever the case, the key question to be asked around the idea of a national dialogue in South Sudan is not whether the initiative is necessary, but rather, can it work in face of prevailing circumstances?

For better analysis, an understanding of the concept dialogue is important. [Clark University presents a](#)

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

UGANDA
SOUTH SUDAN

YUSUF KIRANDA

SEPT 2017

www.kas.de/uganda/en

[collection of different definitions of dialogue.](#) Among them is the view that [“dialogue is a space of civility or equality in which those who differ may listen and speak to each other.”](#) In [“Coming to our Senses,”](#) [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#) points out that no one needs to dominate a dialogue and that it would cease being a dialogue the moment one person or group attempts to control it. On its part, the [UNDP sees dialogue as an inclusive process that builds ownership and enables people to identify new approaches to solve common challenges.](#) And that it is [“not just about sitting around the table but changing the way people talk, think and communicate with each other.”](#)

The above definitions raise fundamental questions to the South Sudan national dialogue initiative. Are the different sides in the conflict

equally represented? Is the process free of domination by selected individuals or groups? Is there willingness among the different sides to listen to each other? Unfortunately, the current set-up of South Sudan’s national dialogue provides no an affirmative answer to any of the above questions. Instead, the dialogue remains a unilateral push by the Salvar Kiir side and [the opposition has ruled out participation in the national dialogue.](#)

My interactions with South Sudan elite living in Uganda reveals strong support for a national dialogue back home. The most cited reason for this view is that of giving chance to everyday South Sudanese to participate in talking peace, through facing the deep-seated differences as communities, be it ethnic, economic, political, historical, or otherwise. The validity of these

arguments is not in question. However, to understand whether a national dialogue can be an answer to the conflict in South Sudan, we must begin with appreciating the nature and circumstances around the conflict itself.

There have been widespread debates to underscore the role of ethnic differences in the South Sudan conflict. These centre on long-standing differences and power struggles between South Sudanese dominant tribes—the Dinka and the Nuer—differences which extend high up into national institutions, in particular, the South Sudan liberation movement and its military wing, the South Sudan Liberation Army.

Ethnicity can indeed be a strong factor in forging social cooperation, trust, and relationships particularly in societies where access to opportunities is personalised and de-

pendent on know who rather than know how. In the [Origins of Political Order](#), Francis Fukuyama illustrates the evolution of human cooperation from kin selection, the tendency to favour immediate family members, to reciprocal altruism, the tendency to favour those within our groups with the view that they will return a favour at some point. Given that institutions for depersonalised cooperation are still non-existent in South Sudan it understandable that ethnicity thrives as a tool for forging cooperation and by extension escalating differences and conflict between diverse groups. This nevertheless does not suggest that ethnic differences are at the centre of conflict in South Sudan. Perhaps it can support an argument that ethnicity is strong mobilising factor in the conflict.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

UGANDA
SOUTH SUDAN

YUSUF KIRANDA

SEPT 2017

www.kas.de/uganda/en

Together with my co-authors Michael Mugisha, Mathias Kamp and Donnas Ojok, [we argued in 2015 that the 2013 violent outbreak in South Sudan was closely linked to the question of oil rents](#). In our paper on [conflict and state formation in South Sudan](#), we argued that oil rents managed to forge a reintegration of various militia factions, which partly resulted in that attainment South Sudan independence. On the other hand, however, the perverse incentives that oil rents created, and with matching offers from Khartoum, prevented the top leadership of the SPLM from implementing needed reforms thereby undermining the foundation for peace, stability and good governance.

[Alex de Waal's "political marketplace"](#) framework is very useful in understanding the [politics of cor-](#)

[ruption and coercion](#) that underlines conflict in countries like South Sudan. He presents three principle features of countries where the political marketplace occurs: “(a) [the dominance of inter-personal political bargaining over formal rules and procedures](#), (b) [pervasive rent-seeking by members of the political and business elite](#), and (c) [integration into a global patronage order](#).”

The political marketplace framework derives us to underscore three aspects in the South Sudan conflict: (a) the position of the “big men” (Salvar Kiir, Reik Machar and their immediate cronies), can they negotiate or can they not? (b) the role of oil rents, and (c) the role of international players such as the United States, China, Uganda, Sudan, etc. As the evidence suggests, the possibility for a peaceful settlement in South Sudan is going to

be contingent on the above three aspects.

Understanding promising paths to a peaceful end to the conflict in South Sudan is key to placing the role of a national dialogue in that path. In this regard, the available evidence informs us of some critical points. First, although there exist long standing differences among the peoples of South Sudan, this was not a root cause for the violent outbreak in 2013 that has escalated into the current civil war. The outbreak and sustenance of the South Sudan conflict is underlined by differences between two “big men,” Salvar Kiir and his arch rival, Riek Machar. The power and influence these men have in South Sudan exceeds any formal rules and procedures including what a national dialogue can achieve. Secondly, the aspect of political rent-

seeking suggests that several militias in South Sudan are for pay as you go, which can explain the limited interest of some fighting groups in the peace processes. Thirdly, the role of international players who clearly have competing interests in South Sudan has considerable implications for a successful national dialogue aimed at achieving peace.

The [Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative \(IPTI\)](#) draws on 17 dialogue experiences to provide critical lessons for South Sudan’s national dialogue efforts. Among the key lessons include the [need to reduce levels of violence prior to the dialogue, which is also based on elite deals, establishing an inclusive, transparent and representative process as well as the contributions of international partners](#). In the case of South Sudan, however, as the

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

UGANDA
SOUTH SUDAN

YUSUF KIRANDA

SEPT 2017

www.kas.de/uganda/en

levels of violence escalate and new militia groups continue to emerge, the conditions for a cordial national dialogue are ostensibly nonexistent. Indeed, a UNDP paper on conflict prevention and peacebuilding points out that [“dialogue requires that the basic conditions be present first.”](#) It goes further to stress that [“when violence, hate, and mistrust remain stronger than the will to forge a consensus, or if there is a significant imbalance of power or a lack of political will among the participants, then the situation might not be ripe for dialogue. Moreover, participants must feel free to speak their minds without fear of retribution, or rejection”](#)

When faced with complex emergencies such as the conflict in South Sudan, we find ourselves under immense pressure to experiment several solutions. This might explain

the high excitement surrounding the move towards a national dialogue in South Sudan. However, any hopes in a national dialogue delivering peace for South Sudan should be held with caution for several reasons. First, significant protagonists in the South Sudan conflict remain distanced from the process; second, the continuous escalation of violence makes hosting a national dialogue very difficult if not impossible to achieve; and third, the underlying causes of sustained conflict may not be addressed through a national dialogue. Dialogue is very good thing. It is best practice in addressing differences and conflict but only if the conflicting parties are willing to engage. In the case of South Sudan, however, a national dialogue may not be the magic bullet to finding peace.