

Book review

The politics of fear in South Sudan: Generating Chaos, Creating Conflict

Daniel Akech Thiong, 2021

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The Politics of Fear in South Sudan: Generating Chaos, Creating Conflict applies security dilemma theory to explain how the liberation legacy, coupled with the challenges of nation-building, was aggravated by malicious propaganda, media disinformation, fanatical tribalism, rent-seeking corruption, and nepotistic kleptocracy. This book was written by Daniel Akech Thiong, a South Sudanese intellectual who grew up during the Sudanese second civil war in the 1980s and was taken to the United States of America in 2001 to further his education and to acquire citizenship under the humanitarian project of ‘Lost Boys’. It is dedicated to the renowned and ruthless commander of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM/A), the late William Nyuon Bany. The book was published in 2021 by Zed Books (Bloomsbury Publishing, London).

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The concept of the ‘politics of fear’ was first introduced by Frank Furedi (1997), the Hungarian-Canadian Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent. It was used later by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) during the Ebola pandemic in Africa (Hofman and Sokhieng 2017). Nhial Bol Aken (2018), a veteran South Sudanese journalist, summarised the politics of fear using the following outcry of the citizens under the embattled rule of President Salva Kiir, Vice President Riek Machar and other politicians who captured the South Sudanese state without a vision: *when they disagree, they kill, and when they agree they loot*. Mr Thiong noted the following main historical epochs in expounding on the factors and the actors in the evolution of the politics of fear in the context of South Sudan:

- The Anya-nya movement and Southern Sudan autonomy (1955–1983) in the history of resistance and liberation, with assistance from Israel.
- The flooding of the River Nile (1961/1962) as an example of a natural disaster where Egypt promoted its historical perspective and existential interest.
- SPLM/A and multiple allies (1983–2011) against marginalisation, a vision derailed by the 1991 splits due to nepotistic tribal domination, looting and corruption that influenced the false start of the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) in 2005, and the blunders of the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) in 2011 through corrupt practices in construction, oil sales, defense contracts, currency exchange, the Crisis Management Committee, Letters of Credits, hotel bills, travel expenses and appointments to strategic public offices by presidential decrees.
- Challenges with IGAD mediation and the conflict resolution architecture (2002–2018) related to the difficult negotiations and hurdles of implementation, where too many players had to be

accommodated in government for rent-seeking and buying peace while still categorised as opposition.

- South Sudan as a landlocked country with porous borders with Kenya and Uganda benefiting from a loose neighbourliness and informal trade, and with China deeply involved in the oil sector and Egypt in water surveillance against Ethiopia.
- Social media use and the promotion of fearmongering markets for promoting mass destruction, including sharing of hate videos and war songs, without accountability.

In his book, Mr Thiong placed special emphasis on how Dr John Garang emerged as the strongest guerrilla commander based on his charisma, brutality, ideological manipulation, and use of propaganda and threats. He discussed how unhealthy power competition led to splits and deadly internal rivalries, for example in 1991 when the SPLA's intelligence officers concocted reports against their colleagues in order to instill fear. The booty and spoils of war became a source of wealth for many SPLM/A field commanders, cementing and normalising the spree of corruption and at the same time obliterating accountability.

According to Mr Thiong, patrimonial theory about fear of sabotage by the Government of Sudan in Khartoum and its allies abroad, united the Southern Sudanese to confront the common enemy and to liberate themselves, ultimately leading to independence. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 did not resolve the problem of politics of fear, which continued to negate the principles of good governance and responsible leadership even after the independence of South Sudan in 2011. This problem continued with the military marginalisation in Equatoria, the fueling of conflicts between Shilluk and Apadang Dinka over land issues in Upper Nile, the arbitrary arrest of critics of government, the assassination of opponents, the surveillance of citizens, and interference in businesses to deny privileges to the opposition. According to Mr Thiong, the security dilemma caused by ethnic balkanisation and division of South Sudan into 28, and later 32 Bantustan states in 2015 and 2017, has negatively affected all the citizens, including President

Salva Kiir and the Jieng Council of Elders (JCE) who advised him to take the decisions to increase the number of states. For example, Deng Athuai, the chairman of South Sudanese civil society from the Dinka tribe, was picked up in his hotel room in Juba and packed into a nylon bag – to be found dumped almost dead across the White Nile River in 2011. Three years later he was shot in his thigh by an “unknown gunman”. The same happened to Isaiah Ding Abraham Chan in 2012, another critic of the government from the Dinka tribe, when he was lured out of his house in Juba at night and shot dead by an “unknown gunman” (Biar 2012).

“The crux of the security dilemma is that through efforts to enhance their own security, actors provoked fear and enacted countermeasures”, wrote Mr Thiong in his book. This has badly tainted the image of South Sudan, especially with the shocking scenes of targeted killings in Juba when SPLM/A tensions lapsed into violent internal conflict in 2013. “The shooting is not stopping ... It is not expected to stop”. He lamented that the situation left no space for rational thinking and the rule of law, but rather fear mongering, no consideration for distributive justice and sharing of resources, and no jobs awarded on the merits of competence. He used hysteresis theory of historical legacies to explain this political rent-seeking and kleptocratic attitude, which has contributed to spreading the politics of fear, with accumulation of grievances created by a patronage system that lacks the responsibility of government to protect its citizens and to build trust. According to him, greed-grievance theory complicates the security dilemma, especially when neopatrimonialism is applied using state-generated resources to buy public support and loyalty without earning it.

“The Politics of Fear in South Sudan” offers an enriching account to readers. It confirms what Dr Lam Akol wrote in the *“SPLM/SPLA: Inside An African Revolution”*, published in 2001 by Khartoum University Press, in exposing the conditions that invalidated democracy and human rights, leading to a squeezed political space during the time of liberation. Alex de Waal (2014) also wrote *“Visualizing South Sudan: Rent-Seeking Rebellions”* in 2014 to illustrate how kleptocracy has taken root under

the pretext of war and peace. Dr Peter Adwok Nyaba, in his book “*South Sudan: The State we Aspire to*”, published by Africa World Books in 2017, succinctly defined the SPLM/A as an organisation that was founded in a situation of anguish, pain, death and unclear political and military trajectory or functional structures. The same facts were exposed by Dr Carol Berger in her journal article “*Ethnocide as a Tool of State-Building: South Sudan and the Never-ending War*”, which was published by Martin Plaut in 2019.

To add to the merits of the book, the responsibility of any government to protect its citizens is key in addressing the problem of the politics of fear. This principle should be adopted as a core international principle of peaceful co-existence under international humanitarian and human rights law, with three pillars of protection: responsibilities of the state, international assistance for capacity-building, and timely collective response. The spree of large-scale corruption with untamed conflict of interests, the ethnicised hate speech in the mass media and the local extrajudicial killings were all identified in Mr Thiong’s book as the main instruments used in South Sudan for propagating the politics of fear by the ruling and opposition elites and their supporters. The irresponsible behaviors have pitted the local communities against each other with uncontrollable emotional and toxic resentments and callousness nurtured by the tolerated kleptocratic practices in the public offices. The realisation of “South Sudan Vision 2040” for freedom, equality, justice, peace and prosperity has been made difficult by these attitudes. Instead of building an educated and proud nation, many young people were recruited into the tribal militia to unleash violence in order to ensure survival. The failed campaign of making unity of the Sudan attractive to the people of Southern Sudan, at the time of the internationally supported referendum for self-determination in 2011, resulted in the birth of the Republic of South Sudan. Ironically, the new country slipped back into deadlier conflicts from 2013, thereby exacerbating the politics of fear in the country. This tainted the image of the SPLM/A, especially when its leaders and their family members started lavishly enriching

themselves through criminal enterprises and acquiring properties and businesses – all while the masses of the people languished in abject poverty in squalid conditions. Despite its merits, Daniel Akech Thiong's book did not critically dissect and connect the phases in history where the politics of fear evolved in South Sudan. Most of its narratives hold only President Salva Kiir and Vice President Dr Riek Machar responsible for the problems of South Sudan and the slow pace of nation-state building. This attribution presents a limited diagnosis of the genesis and evolution of the bad practices of the politics of fear in South Sudan. The biases and prejudices of the author could also be detected in his portrayal of the Dinka tribe (where he hails from) as the victim of the politics of fear. This is understandable as Mr Thiong's ideas are generated from the perspective of his cultural milieu and how Bor and Twich Dinka sections look at the politics of liberation and nation-state building. This is confirmed by the direct translation of songs and common expressions in the Dinka language and thinking habits, as expressed in the book.

The Politics of Fear in South Sudan: Generating Chaos, Creating Conflict recorded some of the obvious facts for reforms and good governance, which should be realised through responsible leadership and statecraft. The damage created by the perpetrated politics of fear is huge and has ruined the trust among the citizens and between the government, and the opposition. Therefore, finding sustainable methods to address this problem is a prerequisite for peacebuilding and nation-state development for South Sudan. The book validates the thesis of Alishba Zarmeen that "Any society ridden with superstition, religious indoctrination, lack of education, and nationalism is always going to be a violent society". It contributes to the search for evidence-based diagnosis, resolution and management of conflict without the use of dreadful coercion. Thus, the book is a recommendable read for those who want to understand what is entailed in leading an African liberation movement and running a republic in a post-conflict situation.

There is a need to connect chronologically the narratives on the politics of fear, starting with the era when the Arabs entered the Sudan to

impose their culture and Islamic religion on the indigenous population during the slave trade. This was followed in later decades by the colonial nation-state formation enforced by unleashing fear on the indigenous Sudanese communities from 1821 to 1956 – to consolidate their extractive interests. Having faced fierce resistance, the British military rulers, in collaboration with Egyptian local government officers and some Sudanese support staff, came up with a new policy of divide-and-conquer from 1922 to 1945. The same politics was adopted later during the centralised governance phase by politico–military elites in Khartoum in 1956 to 1971, which failed to manage the diversity. The fear and reaction provoked the first civil war in Southern Sudan from 1955 to 1972 and again the second civil war from 1983 to 2005 – resulting in an embattled independence with recycled leadership failures from 2011 to date (Rolandsen and Daly 2016).¹ The lesson learnt is that silencing the critics of government and opposition does not solve the problem but postpones it and this leads to increased grievances, corruption, greed, manipulation, patrimonialism, exploitation, conflicts, fragmentation, identity crises, and missed opportunities for nation-state building exacerbated by a lack of accountability and responsibility of government to protect the citizens and guide them on the path of peace, liberty, justice and prosperity.

The book leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. This requires a follow-up to allow for constructive engagements and frank dialogue in a free civic space to put things right institutionally, based on good governance, to fix the broken social fabrics with a properly designed and people-centered constitution. This will help to usher in the much needed sustainable development agenda to replace dreadful recurrent conflicts and chaos.

1 Also see Johnson, Douglas H. 2016. *South Sudan: a new history for a new nation*. Athens OH, Ohio University Press.

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