

THE SUDAN PEOPLES' LIBERATION MOVEMENT

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The formation of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) is a continuation of the past struggles of the Sudanese people, before, during and after colonialism.

The rise of the SPLM/A in 1983 was a translation and a continuation of the longstanding political discontent into an armed conflict.

The resort of the SPLM/A to armed struggle was informed by the earlier armed struggles against repression, and represented a continuation of them after they had been temporarily halted by colonialism and later by the Addis Ababa Agreement, which stopped the civil war in southern Sudan for a short while (1972-1983).

Resistance has been the natural reaction of the oppressed and marginalized peoples of the Sudan against the various Khartoum-based governments. The resistance took different forms according to the prevailing circumstances.

In the cities and urban centers it took the form of popular uprisings (1964 and 1985), while in the marginalized areas, especially of Southern Sudan, Southern Kordofan and Southern Blue Nile, the resistance took the form of popular and patriotic armed struggle (1955-1973 and 1983-2005).

The birth and formation of the SPLM/A in 1983 was, therefore, not an isolated incident, but rather a culmination and continuation of these struggles of the Sudanese people.

However, in reaction to Nimeiri's machinations and consistent attempts at unilaterally dismantling the Addis Ababa Accord, the Akobo mutiny (1975) inevitably followed.

Elements of this mutiny combined with some of the dismissed ex-Anya-nya I soldiers and officers to form what became known as Anya-nya 11 in Upper Nile. Later on, and mainly in 1982, armed resistance, under the same name but with a different command sprang up in Bahr el Ghazal.

Furthermore, prominent Anya-nya officers, who were absorbed in the Sudanese army, continued to organize within that army in order to transform the situation, by either attacking and capturing Juba or withdrawing to the bushes to wage a protracted armed struggle.

But Khartoum seized the initiative and attacked Bor and Pibor garrison on 16/5/1983. Later the Ayod garrison attacked Khartoum forces that were sent to arrest its ex-Anya-nya commander. This was the spark that lit the tinderbox.

Simultaneously, with the military moves, prominent Southern politicians and students organized several underground organizations to mobilize the masses against the dismantling of the agreement.

These opposition bodies included the National Action Movement (NAM), Movement for Total Liberation of Southern Sudan (MTLSS), Juwama African People's Organization (JAPO); Council for the Unity of Southern Sudan (CUSS) and South Sudan Liberation Front (SSLF), which actually started a guerrilla war in 1982 and came into the limelight in July 1983 when it seized a number of foreigners in Boma post.

By early 1983 the necessary conditions had combined for a revolutionary situation. The battles of Bor (commanded by Major Kerubino Kwanyin Bol), Pibor (commanded by Captain Riek Macuoc) and Ayod (commanded by Major William Nyoun Bany) caused desertions in other units of Southern command and Northern Sudan.

This drove students and other civilians *en masse* to join the armed struggle, which resulted in the exodus of refugees into neighboring countries, especially Ethiopia.

Elements of the political and military organizations and officers referred to earlier united and founded the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan People's Liberation movement (SPLM).

Although the SPLM emerged to continue the armed struggle waged by earlier movements, it saw the resolution of Sudan's crisis differently from the way they did. SPLM believes that Sudan's salvation lies in the solution of both the "national groups" and religious questions within the context of a united, democratic and secular Sudan.

Thus, although the SPLM started by necessity in the South, it essentially aims at spreading its message all over the Sudan, thus transform the whole country.

Departure from the Thinking Paradigm of “Old Sudan”

It dawned on the SPLM leadership that marginalization in all its forms, discrimination, injustice and subordination, constitute the root causes of the conflict that cannot be addressed in a piecemeal fashion through dishing out handouts and concessions to the disgruntled and rebellious groups whenever a conflict erupted in a particular region.

Sudanese have problems everywhere in the west, in the east, in the center, and even in the far north. The later outbreak of the armed conflicts and wars in eastern and western Sudan has vindicated the correctness and farsightedness of this analysis and vision.

Defining the problem as the “southern problem” is in itself an attempt at marginalizing southerners. It is not the “problem of the South”, as conventionally advocated by the successive ruling regimes in Khartoum, but rather the “problem of the Sudan”, particularized in the South.

In contradistinction from the previous secessionist movements, the SPLM advocated the liberation of the whole Sudan and not only south Sudan.

This shift of paradigm also marks a radical departure from the traditional struggle in the South for independence. This is what it has always been since 1955 when the Anya-Nya war started. The avowed objective was the independence of the South.

This objective was not achieved; it was compromised in 1972, in the Addis Ababa agreement, when Southern Sudan was “given” local autonomy. The SPLM moved away from this paradigm of the “southern problem”, solving the “southern problem” and what to “give” to southerners.

When you are defined as the others, as something different, through reference to the “southern problem”, for instance, that is in itself a problem i.e. the people who have a problem are the Southerners, but this is not true.

It is the Sudanese state, epitomized by the power structure in the Center, which needs to be radically restructured in order to accommodate the Sudan’s manifold diversity and attend to all forms of exclusion and marginalization of its people, be they in the South or in any other marginalized region. The fish rots from the head and not from the tail!

Challenges and Contradictions of the Struggle

The SPLM's grand objective of bringing about radical and fundamental change in the Sudan as a whole was not a dream, but an objective that was premised on the victories and setbacks of the Sudanese people and on the correct and visionary definition of the central problem of the Sudan.

Since its inception, the SPLM critically and objectively analyzed the Sudanese reality and concluded that we must struggle for a new type of Sudan to which we all belong; a united Sudan, albeit on new bases; a new Sudan political dispensation that is anchored in and based on the realities of the Sudan, on both our historical and contemporary diversities.

We call this new political dispensation the New Sudan, as opposed to the Old Sudan, which has cost us 42 years of war since independence.

On the other hand, however, this does not mean that there are no skeptics within the ranks of the Movement, so far as the New Sudan vision is concerned. There are, and have always been, differences. In fact, disagreements have occurred, degenerating into violent confrontations at various historical junctures in the evolution of the SPLM/A.

Thus, the vision of the New Sudan, and the adoption of objectives and programs consistent with it, had its share of difficulties and troubles in the early days of the Movement. Some leaders of the SPLM and some Anya-Nya Commanders decided to leave the Movement because they wanted to fight for an independent Southern Sudan and not for a New Sudan.

However, instead of fighting the Sudan government in order to achieve the objective of independence, they allied themselves with the same government and fought the incipient SPLM/A for four years. It is true that the phenomenon of divisions and splits is normal given the diversity of vision and political thinking in any national liberation movement.

What is unfathomable, however, is the collaboration with the enemy of the people. The lesson to draw from this experience is that the self-professed separatists should not be allowed to shout empty slogans about separation, thus, misinforming our people. They should concretely explain to the people how they plan to achieve the objective of separation.

The SPLM emerged victorious and continued to grow in might and morale, and the SPLA firmly established itself as an indisputable decisive political and military force in the Sudanese political arena.

The advent of the 1990s witnessed the collapse of the Eastern Block countries, and the end of the Cold War, and this marked a world transition from one historical era to a new one. At the same time, many profound changes occurred in the East Africa region.

Notably these were: the collapse of the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam in Ethiopia; the emergence of Eritrea as an independent state; and the disintegration of Somalia.

The cumulative effects of all these regional and international events, especially the loss of support from Mengistu's Ethiopia, accompanied by an opportunistic attempt by the NIF regime and other foreign circles to destroy the SPLM/A in 1991, led some to believe, wrongly, that the Movement had been weakened by the loss of the Ethiopian support, and this in turn led to the split of the SPLM/A in August 28, 1991.

The split caused the people of the Sudan, especially in the south, incalculable harm and suffering and retarded the march of the SPLM to victory.

It divided the Movement at a time of regional and international turmoil when unity was needed most, as well as dividing the people along tribal lines, inciting southerners against each other, resulting in the death of untold numbers of innocent civilians.

On the other hand, the NIF effectively used the split, both militarily and politically, in its war against the SPLM/A. Besides, the 1991 episode led many Northerners to wonder whether the SPLM/A was abandoning its long-held objective of the New Sudan, while Southerners started to have doubts about SPLM strategy and fears as to whether the Movement really had their interests at heart.

This confusion and fear were sufficiently addressed through open debate and subsequent resolutions during the First SPLM/A National Convention.

The SPLM/A convened its first National Convention in the period between 2-12 April 1994 with the objective of debating all issues of concern to the movement and its future direction, especially in the aftermath of the split of 1991.

The Convention correctly addressed the issue of Self-determination as a people's right that does not contradict the SPLM objective of a united democratic New Sudan, but on the contrary enhances it. Indeed, correctly perceived, the New Sudan can only be achieved through the mechanism of self-determination i.e. through the free will of the Sudanese people.

The ensuing debate during the Convention, therefore, reaffirmed the fact that the realization of the vision of the New Sudan, brought about either through a combination of armed struggle and urban popular uprisings or a politically negotiated settlement, is the key for the attainment of freedom, equality and justice for the Sudanese people.

We can only achieve our aim, whether this is the New Sudan, self-determination, or separation, only if power is radically restructured in the center, in Khartoum.

It is unthinkable that the regime will voluntarily relinquish power or be forced by international pressures to grant separation on a silver plate! It was, thus, decided in unequivocal terms that the establishment of the New Sudan and the achievement of the right to, and exercise of, self-determination are the two principal objectives of the Movement.

Those who are skeptical about the New Sudan vision are not confined to the SPLM membership. There are those, particularly in Northern Sudan, who condemned out rightly the vision merely because it came from a source unfamiliar to their minds and hearts.

Most importantly, there are forces that benefited, and continue to benefit, from the Old Sudan. They are well aware that the New Sudan is a threat to their interests, be they in power or the opposition.

These forces are, thus, bent on propagating a distorted image of both the Vision and the SPLM, thus misleading and frightening away their respective constituencies by insisting that the New Sudan is a mere euphemism for an African, Christian, anti-Arab and Islamic entity, which, in collaboration with Zionism, is intent on doing away with the Arab-Islamic identity of the Sudanese (the North, in particular).

Such unfounded suspicions, fueled by racism and religious bigotry, have been adequately responded to elsewhere and would not stand the test of time. Contrary to what the critics and skeptics think, the concept of the New Sudan has no racial, ethnic or separatist connotations.

It is rather a framework, a national project, for building a true and sustainable Citizenship-State capable of accommodating the multiple diversities of Sudanese society. Above all, the concept is an intellectual and scholarly contribution to the unfolding political discourse on the rebuilding of the Sudanese State.