

Reflections on the Politics of the Formation of the Government of National Unity in the Sudan:

Some Lessons the SPLM Leadership must Learn

John G Nyuot Yoh

After several weeks of heated debate between the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the formation of the Government of National Unity (GONU) in Sudan on 20 September 2005, has revealed four important lessons which the SPLM leadership must carefully study and take some actions on. Firstly, the debate over who should take charge of the Ministry of Energy and Mining has sidelined the central role of the SPLM as the guardian of the Sudan's transformation and the guarantor of the Southern Sudanese rights in a united transformed Sudan. The SPLM's ideological and philosophical tenets of change and transformation - from a decadent, corrupt old Sudan, where the leadership's main objective has been to accumulate wealth, manipulate poor people's sentiments in the name of religion and Arab chauvinism, using political Islam as a means to rule the country, to a Sudan where the ordinary Sudanese is the main focus of the government - were blurred by the politics around the Energy and Mining issue. The NCP leadership was and is aware that the oil is in the South and knows that the SPLM has the right to be allocated the Ministry. What the NCP had on its side was time. It knew that the SPLM needed to gain time, and that was what the NCP used against it.

Throughout the negotiations over the Energy Ministry, the SPLM was forced to concentrate on the South, so that its real potential as the main political catalyst for the transformation of the Sudan could be watered down. The SPLM is seen by Sudanese as the vehicle and instrument of change in the country. The fact that the NCP managed to make the SPLM look like a localist Southern party during the negotiations, was a big blow to the SPLM's image as a national progressive movement. The SPLM must take immediate remedial action to correct this perception. One way to do so would be to become directly

involved in peace negotiations with Darfurians and Easterners and to make sure that their shares in power are secured. The New Sudan ideology was never about the distribution of positions or power; it was about equality and the just distribution of these positions. Most importantly it was about bringing change to the whole country – one in which every Sudanese, feels Sudanese, and deserves a government of which she/he can be proud.

There is no doubt that the SPLM, as the guardian of change in the country, was hard hit by the death of Dr John Garang. However, the unity and the collective approach which the new SPLM leadership showed during August – September 2005, was so strong that, had its leadership concentrated on its national agenda, by not only negotiating on behalf of the South, but also on behalf of all the progressive political forces in the country, it would have won more substantial positions, not only for the South, but also for the Darfurians, the Easterners and the NDA, as its natural allies. What the Al-Beshir-Taha Alliance did, was to show the SPLM that the NCP is the main power broker in the country, that it is the NCP that offers positions, and that therefore any talk of power and wealth-sharing should be determined, not by the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), but by new negotiations with the NCP. The SPLM has therefore committed itself to an open-ended approach to continuous negotiations over government positions, commissions and the financial rows that will most certainly follow. It therefore does not make sense that the SPLM allowed the NCP to take the Ministries of Defence, Interior, Finance, Energy and Mining and Justice, when it is clear that such control over power and wealth sharing in the CPA had been coveted by the NCP. It also means that the provision that unity should be made attractive to Southerners during the interim period, will no longer have meaning, not only to Southerners, but also to other political groups in the country who feel that the CPA is a good document that could be applied to their situations.

The SPLM leadership may be convinced that the NCP was playing for time, knowing that it is the SPLM that will have to bring back hundreds of thousands of returnees and displaced persons to the South. Furthermore, it is the SPLM that will need to deliver essential services to the people of the South. They should not have wasted time negotiating positions with people who have no respect for agreements. Even if the above fears are genuine, there is no reason why the SPLM should have given up all the most important economic and political positions to the NCP, thus creating the impression that every time a new round of negotiations comes - and there will be many of them - the SPLM will give in because the NCP is not interested in implementing the CPA.

Secondly, the formation of the Government of National Unity has also revealed that while the decision-making process within the SPLM leadership has improved compared to what it used to be, the manner in which positions were announced, without the knowledge of 80% of those who were appointed, points to the fact that something seriously needs to be revised in that process. Some members of the movement were allocated positions, which they, had they been informed, might not have accepted or, if given the choice, would have declined. While the SPLM line-up is representative, regionally and ethnically, the nature of the line-up, especially its technical aspects, leaves much to be desired.

The SPLM leadership should make it very clear to its members who are appointed in the Government of National Unity, that they are given assignments to represent the movement, not themselves. This could be done in two ways: by recalling all those who are appointed in GONU to Juba, for a week of political briefing where the whole leadership, plus the Southern Assembly present the SPLM ministers in GONU with a code of conduct and advise them to work as a team, rather than as individuals. In the second place, the SPLM leadership may as well ask its representatives in GONU to report to Juba for briefing every two

months. If this is not done, it will be like sending these men and women into exile, where each of them will find him or herself alone within the next year or so, cornered by NCP petro-dollar politics.

Some of the SPLM members in GONU have protested, because they felt that they deserve higher positions than the ones they have been appointed to. Others strongly felt that the communities and the nationalities they come from were allocated very junior positions, compared to their real political and numerical sizes. Others complained that some individual members of the Movement were allocated senior positions in GONU, which should have been allocated to more senior members who had joined the Movement earlier. One of the explanations given by certain members of the SPLM leadership to answer some of these complaints, was that some of these senior SPLM members do not want to work in the North. The question then is, if these members have already informed the leadership, directly or indirectly, of their intention not to work in the North, why allocate to them positions in the North? These issues should be carefully studied by the leadership, and if it has not already allocated positions in the government of Southern Sudan and in governments of states, it has to widen its consultations and inform those it intends to deploy.

Most importantly, those who are currently advising the SPLM leadership should open their eyes and ears widely, because the SPLM-NCP partnership is supposed to avoid focus on the distribution of positions, and concentrate on creating true change in the lives of the people of Sudan and the South in particular. Giving the impression that the sole aim of the SPLM-NCP partnership is to buy people's loyalty with positions will definitely defeat the purpose of the SPLM/A struggle, for which millions have died, while millions of others are waiting to go home and find real changes there. This is the real challenge facing the SPLM leadership.

Thirdly, the lesson which the SPLM should learn from the politics of the formation of GONU is that whenever a leadership of an organisation preoccupies itself with procedures and takes a longer time negotiating political issues, the other parts of the organisation tend to become paralyzed. This is always the case in a centralised system, where members of the movement are waiting in anticipation of orders and are not participating in decision making. The SPLM leadership should start to divide roles among its members - and it has lots of qualified people to take up such roles. Only if the leadership and its advisors look around them and spread the net wider, beyond their immediate surroundings, will a good and healthy solution be found.

Indeed, it was impressive that once it became clear that the NCP was buying time, the SPLM leadership correctly decided to speed up the process of the formation of constitutional structures in the South. It could have been done faster and better. When the SPLM and NCP were busy negotiating positions, the NCP was busy emptying the treasury of the national economy and enriching its cronies and potential allies. The SPLM should have appointed a shadow caretaker government of its own, during the pre-interim period to work with the NCP. The SPLM did appoint one person to deal with the NCP as a contact person; however, it should have appointed a representative in every ministry in central government to monitor activities there. In fact, the NCP caretaker government had done many things during the past six months that it would not have done, even when it was still a government.

During the negotiations, the NCP was busy signing contracts, cementing its international relations and indeed emptying the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of staff by deploying them in all corners of the world, in anticipation that the SPLM will find all the embassy and consulate positions already filled, hence leaving no room for the new minister to employ Southerners and members from the other marginalised areas in such positions. The SPLM leadership should therefore come up with a new mechanism through which a

selected dedicated group of its members are allocated responsibilities to monitor every aspect of the CPA. Each of these members should be assigned specific tasks, which relate to the implementation of the peace agreement. Thus when any new rounds of negotiations with the NCP commence, the group will have worked out all the modalities, and time is not spent on minor issues which should be delegated to technocrats within the Movement.

Fourthly, the formation of the national government has revealed that the SPLM needs to strengthen its information and international affairs units. The SPLM should, on a daily basis, inform the international community and those African countries that had guaranteed and witnessed the peace agreement, on the process of the implementation of the peace agreement. SPLM diplomats should be assigned the specific task to keep the world informed about the delays the NCP creates on a daily basis. Sudan TV and Radio were definitely supportive of the NCP position on the negotiations over the positions in GONU and the printed media was biased, to the extent of disinformation. International community representatives in Khartoum were given on a daily basis, the impression that the Energy and Mining fiasco was actually under control and that that department was going to be allocated to the SPLM.

The disinformation campaign was so well organized that the each senior member of the NCP played his role to perfection. Only Al-Beshir and Taha were not allowed to make any statements over the issue, except when they were cornered by the independent media, otherwise they avoided interviews. The impression was given in the media that Nafie and Khalifa were the chief negotiators of the NCP. The reality was that Taha was the main reference point from the government side. Everybody else who is significant in the NCP was asked to play a role in the disinformation campaign.

As a result, important issues such as peace in Darfur, the frozen negotiations in the East and the drafting of the constitution of Southern Sudan were sidelined in the media for almost a month and a half. The SPLM has always been very weak in its information and propaganda wing. For the time being, the SPLM will need to collaborate with the existing Southern private newspapers and start efforts towards the establishment of a national TV and radio station in Juba. Such a project would not require much effort since the South is endowed with experienced and well-trained journalists and technicians. Until such time that engineers could be recruited from abroad to run the stations, Southern technicians will perform that task. A call from President Salva Kiir and his Deputy Dr Riek Machar, to the talented Southern journalists, to assemble in Juba to plan for the establishment of TV and radio stations that would cover the whole of Sudan, will be sufficient. These are some of the serious lessons to be learned by the SPLM leadership, which at the same time represent timely warnings about difficult times ahead.