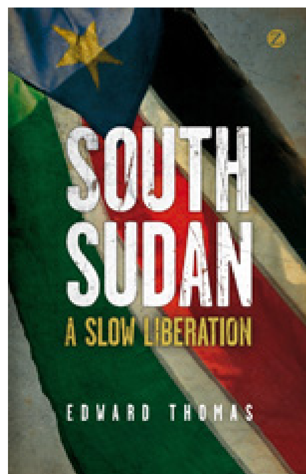
# South Sudan: A Slow Liberation

*By Edward Thomas*




Twentieth-century Sudan was Africa's conflicted behemoth: a landmass of one million square miles; societies rich with interconnections and contradictions; and a highly unequal economic and political system that set those societies against each other. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed ten years ago, was supposed to end the armed conflicts born of this economic and political system. The peace was signed by the Khartoum government, led by a broad alliance of the winners from Sudan's unequal system, and by the southern-based rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, the SPLM, whose base lay in the south, Sudan's poorest and most diverse periphery. The peace was financed by oil revenues, which were another outcome of war. Khartoum had built an oil industry through a mix of astute trade diplomacy in east Asia and ferocious warfare that used local militias to depopulate the oilfields of South Sudan. Oil revenues were now to be used to reinvent Sudan as a more unified, inclusive, equal country. The CPA also gave South Sudanese a unique get-out clause – they could vote for separation if unity and inclusion failed to materialize. In 2011, South Sudanese voters overwhelmingly chose independence. The new Republic of South Sudan was born in July, with Africa's third largest oil reserves.

But ten years on, comprehensive peace has eluded both South Sudan and Sudan. Drawing on my new book, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*, here I address the elusive peace in South Sudan today. South Sudan's current civil war began almost thirteen months ago. It has displaced up to two million of the country's exhausted people and gruesomely reconfigured relationships between different communities. Maybe fifty thousand people have been killed. The government spent some of its oil rents addressing South Sudan's hyper-underdevelopment – the modest progress has been reversed. Even more money was invested in its army, which served as an expensive mechanism for resolving the contradictions of the civil war of 1983-2005. South Sudan's army united the guerrilla army which had fought against Khartoum with Khartoum's southern militias (deployed mainly around the oilfields) in a single vast structure with more generals than the US army. At the outset of peace, all that defence spending sometimes seemed like a strangely judicious kind of profligacy – a way of buying off hungry troublemakers with steady jobs. Nowadays, it feels like a monstrous failure that may become a macabre precedent for future peace deals.

Many members of former Khartoum-aligned militias belong to the Nuer ethnic community and South Sudan's president is from the Dinka community, the Nuer's closest cousins in language and culture. The December 2015 events started with massacres of Nuer people in Juba, many reportedly committed by Dinka irregulars. Within three days, Nuer-Dinka killings had spread to Bor, a historically Dinka settlement lying on the edge of the Nuer heartlands of Jonglei and Upper Nile. These facts leads many to characterize South Sudan's latest war as an ethnic or tribal one. Tribalism ended the comprehensive peace.

I don't agree with this analysis. One reason I disagree is the rapid onset of conflict. In 1955 a barracks mutiny was the starting point for what was to be independent Sudan's first civil war. But it was eight years before rebels began holding territory. In 1983, another barracks mutiny, in Bor, led to another civil war. It took the mutineers several months to capture territory. This time round, the countryside was awash with guns and contradictions, and it only took three days for rebels to occupy Jonglei.

Guns and contradictions had caused a crisis in the pastoralist economy, and this crisis is an important non-ethnic factor in the war. Jonglei lies between the Nile and the Ethiopian border. Hungry, remote and divided against itself, it was never was part of the comprehensive peace. CPA implementation began with bloody disarmament campaigns in 2006. Disarmament campaigns left some areas with guns and others defenceless. They were a prelude to seven years of wars of massive attack pitting young raiders from different pastoralist groups against each other.

Jonglei is one of six states in South Sudan where a muddy and unusual wetland agro-pastoralism is practiced, and people traditionally lived off grain, milk and fish, and kept herds as insurance against the unpredictable climate. Before the civil wars, people had social reciprocity instead of money, and they had a lot more calories than they have today. By 2009, that economy had been replaced with something more hungry and less predictable. Some people got relief food. Most people had to buy food – but most saw cash less than once a week. For a minority, guns became an adjunct means of production. People disarmed in 2006 had their cattle looted from them, and got guns, and looted cattle in return. Some raids mobilized thousands of young men, and although raiders targeted all communities including their own, inter-communal looting caused the most terrible losses. Jonglei's cattle economy and its social basis was transformed. Young men became more powerful, and girls and patriarchs lost out, as socially owned cattle were stolen and sometimes even sold. This intense violence helped to spread markets and cash. The pastoralism crisis created a new kind of armed youth movement, built around ethnicity, with military and economic functions. The rebellion could not have got off the ground without them.

Another reason for the war is the way that government relates to people. Many foreigners working in South Sudan today think that the country has never had a government, that the new republic is building the state from scratch. Nothing could be further from the truth. South Sudan was the first part of the African interior to be ruled by a modern state. And since the mid-nineteenth century, governments have had some very deep commonalities. First, each successive government has organized its relationship with its rural population around ethnicity – or tribes, as they often liked to call them. Second, each government has depended on external subventions or rents. For a few years in the 1880s, a few local governors balanced their books through local production and local taxation. But every other government has lived off grants from Khartoum, or oil revenues. That meant that the government was economically autonomous from the productive efforts of society. The government couldn't really get involved – rural South Sudan has little in the way of money, private property or markets. In this country, the government spends its time tinkering with money and markets, but in South Sudan, the government's job is totally different. Its job is to allocate external rents and subventions. The government got money from Khartoum or from a Chinese oil company, it gave a lot to the army, kept some, and spent the rest, mostly on wages – which make up half of the budget.

The state faced many dilemmas of allocation. It can't invest in the productive resources of society – most of the time, production systems don't work with money. So it uses ethnicity to resolve the dilemmas of allocation, giving jobs out in unspoken quotas to different ethnic groups. Most of the budget gets spent in the capital, and nearly all of the rest is spent in provincial towns. There's an ethnic dimension to this. Troublesome young pastoralists organized in kinship groups got nothing from the system. But there's also an economic dimension. People in line for a government job have a different view of the government than people in the pastoralist economy. And people in the Juba bubble, where most of the oil money was spent, have no shared economic interests with most people in Jonglei.

In a very extreme way, South Sudan exemplifies the way the state works in Africa – trying to conjure up national unity while cut off from its people and connected to a global commodity chain. Comprehensive peace may not come through a restoration of the status quo ante. It needs a rethink, of how nations and economies work.

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**Edward Thomas**'s new book South Sudan: A Slow Liberation was published this month. He has lived and worked in Sudan and South Sudan for over eight years. He worked as a teacher, researcher and human rights worker for Sudanese and international organizations. Over the past five years, he has written numerous books, reports and articles about South Sudan and its neighbours.

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*Note: All articles give the views of their authors, and not the position of the Justice and Security Research Programme, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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