The Emergence of Official Nationalism in Newly Created South Sudan

News Note

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The world’s newest nation has recently emerged on the global scene: South Sudan. On January 9th, the South Sudanese voted in an outstanding majority of nearly 99% for their independence from Sudan. This marks the official end of over two decades of bloody warfare between the Muslim north, centralized in the government in Khartoum, and the Christian and animist south. It resulted in an estimated two million deaths and more than four million displaced around the world.¹ This is a monumental moment in history, not just for the South Sudanese, but also for the international community as it allows the public to witness first hand the creation of a new official nationalism in a national generation that has known only violent oppression and horrific bloodshed. South Sudanese nationalism has arisen under the unification of the common goal of freedom; however, once true independence is gained the South Sudanese government must rally their population under a new unifying factor or risk the collapse of their new state.

Official nationalism, as defined by Benedict Anderson, is the governmental policy of imposing a national sentiment on its population. This is done through “compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organized propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism...and endless affirmations of the identity of...nation.”² A key example of this that Anderson describes is of ‘Czarist Russification.’ Alexander III’s Russification included making Russian the compulsory language in state-sponsored education and made opportunities in the bureaucracy and economic market for those Russian functionaries and entrepreneurs. ‘Russification’ was successful in “marshalling a growing

² Anderson, p. 101
'Great Russian’ nationalism behind the throne.”³ Just as Alexander III russified the people, South Sudan faces the same possibilities of identity growth and expression led by their government.

Sudan, the largest state in Africa, underwent a similar process of ‘Sudanization’ coined by anthropologist Paul Doornbos. Beginning in 1917,

“Doornbos observed a process of cultural change that involved partial abandonment of Masalit culture, notably the independent status of women, tribal dancing, drinking marissa (millet beer), barter and traditional ways of dressing. All this was replaced by a new orthodoxy that included speaking Arabic, restricting the public role of women, using cash, dressing in the characteristic northern Sudanese manner...and shunning alcohol.”⁴

Facilitators of this process included “traders, administrators, schoolteachers and itinerant fundamentalist preachers.”⁵ To become a functional and prosperous member of Sudan, one had to abandon their tribal identity for that of a ‘Sudanese.’ After independence from the British in 1956, the Arabic Muslim government centered in Khartoum became an authoritarian regime under President Omar al-Bashir with strict and oppressive adherence to ‘Sudanization.’ In many ways South Sudanese nationalism is in direct reaction to this ‘Sudanization.’ Since South Sudan does not gain official independence until July 9th of this year, it is still uncertain what exactly their official nationalism will look like. However, a specific South Sudanese nationalism has emerged based firmly in their common desire for freedom and independence.

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³ Anderson, pp. 87-88
⁴ De Waal, pp. 14-15
⁵ Ibid.
A nation is defined as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”\(^6\) The South Sudanese nationalism is ‘political’ in the sense that they have united under the Sudan’s People Liberation Army (SPLA) to defend their area and fight for an independent state. It is also ‘sovereign’ in this sense; the South Sudanese imagine themselves as separate from Sudan and will gain their legitimate sovereignty within the next few months. The South Sudan nation is also inherently limited, not just territorially but also based on heritage and a common history. This is seen in the referendum vote itself, as who is allowed to vote is a clear indication of who is included and excluded in the nation. Those who were eligible to vote in this referendum were either permanent residents of southern Sudan (having lived there since colonial independence) or those who could identify their ancestral line to an established south Sudanese tribe. Surprisingly though, 51% of those registered to vote were women.\(^7\) This is just one example of the South Sudanese move away from ‘Sudanization’ with the re-establishment of women rights.

With independence, South Sudan must define their nation with what it means to be ‘South Sudanese’ especially in how it differs from Sudanese. The most obvious reaffirmation that Sudan is another is in the name choice of South Sudan, a strong statement in and of itself. The leaders of the SPLA intermediate government met and have officially chosen ‘South Sudan’ for the name of their state; they chose this over other suggestion such as the Nile Republic and Cush, a biblical reference.\(^8\) By choosing ‘South Sudan’ they are still identifying with their heritage as Sudanese, but by specifying ‘South’ they are making a clear distinction that they are apart from the north, not just in territory but in ideology and policy.

\(^6\) Anderson, p. 6
\(^8\) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12478957
Along with choosing a national name, the South Sudanese were also charged with the task of choosing a national flag. A national flag is important for a nation, especially for official nationalism, as it is an instantly recognizable symbol of one’s national identity. A national flag is unique to all others, therefore allowing one to make the distinction with pride that ‘this flag is mine, while that one is yours.’ It is an image that symbolizes the struggles and achievements a nation has endured as well as reinforces the limitation of the nation. South Sudan made the official decision to use the SPLA flag that was already serving as the interim flag for the Government of Southern Sudan. This was an important decision as this flag was the symbol that the southern Sudanese were already using to unite under in their struggle to secede. It gives the South Sudanese a symbol of pride and success and already provides instantly recognizable point of reference as a national symbol.

The most active decision the South Sudanese nation has had to make is in the creation of their own national anthem. The South Sudanese held an X Factor style competition to decide on the tune of their national anthem. Their objective was to move away from the militaristic march of the current Sudanese national anthems and instead create a tune that would encompass their passion for independence, freedom, opportunities, and inclusion. Thousands of South Sudanese gathered in a ‘baking hot concert hall’ in Juba, the national capital, to listen to performer after performer give their rendition of a tune. They spent hours voicing their approvals and dislikes. The nation ties itself closer together through seeking public approval and allowing them to voice their opinions. They are able to more easily imagine their nation as a whole, instead of concentrate on their differences, since

9 http://www.sudantribune.com/South-Sudan-political-parties-to,38012
10 http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12164171
11 ibid.
they were able to come together to help create this part of their identity. It gives the national anthem that much more power as well as it will be easier to unite and rally the nation together under one sentiment. Much of the public response was that a ‘national anthem for me means I declare for everybody that I am free.’ This is a significant sentiment that the anthem concentrates on. Joseph Abuk, chairman of the technical committee tasked with writing the anthem, also ensured that the anthem included ‘something about the south’s history, its people, its land, its resources – and about the struggle that went on for 21 years;” separate from northern Sudan.\(^\text{12}\)

As seen in pictures, the South Sudanese are also now placing their right hand over their heart upon saying the anthem, something the Sudanese does not do. So where is their influence for this? Putting the right hand over the heart is something we Americans do during our national anthem, but this is not a British influence. Upon looking at some common wealth nations around the world, they just stand at attention for their national anthem, including Canada, India, and Britain itself. However, upon looking at countries with heavy American influence such as Panama or the Philippines, they do put their hands over their heart for the national anthem. South Sudan does have American influence, especially in with the aid of Christian missionaries abroad, so it is possible they derive this aspect of national symbolism from them. It could also be their appeal to the United States as an example of a successful free nation. This gives rise to further studies in this interesting subject phenomenon.

While South Sudan has many strides forward in defining their nation and setting the groundwork for their official nationalism, they still have many obstacles to overcome once becoming officially independent. South Sudan is the most under-developed region of the world with over 85% of the

\(^{12}\) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12164171
population illiterate. Not only that but the population is still loyal to their tribal leaders, not to the
government. They have had years to learn disloyalty to a government because of Khartoum, and the
new SPLA government must institute a viable plan to garner support and national sentiment towards
the governmental center. As of now the key aspect that is holding this nation together is the idea of
freedom, but once they have gained this freedom what unifying point will they turn to? They
founded their nationalism in opposition to the Muslim north and have been fighting a battle steeped
heavily in religious differences for over two decades. South Sudan claims to “uphold separation of
church and state and to protect the rights of Muslims and northerners in the south.” But with so
many years of hatred and resentment, will South Sudan be able to emotionally retain this
inclusiveness and how will they define the limitedness of their nation now that the referendum has
been decided? Now that they have had experience imagining themselves as a potential community
and seen the success that they achieved when united together, it’ll be this shared history that will
motivate the population of South Sudan to recognize a shared nationality.

Bibliography


