

# FEEDING FRENZY IN SOUTH SUDAN

By Kevin Bloom & Richard Poplak

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For seven years, award-winning non-fiction writers KEVIN BLOOM and RICHARD POPLAK traversed an Africa in the throes of seismic change on a mission to uncover the forces that are reshaping the continent. They dubbed this era 'Africa 3.0', a new age in Africa's evolution, brought about by the confluence of two momentous phenomena – the disengagement of African governments from the neoliberal sphere, and the advance of the Chinese. Bloom and Poplak have visited 16 countries and conducted more than 500 interviews, a roster that's included heads of state, diplomats, businessmen, soldiers and rebels. They received a Wits China-Africa Reporting Project grant in 2012 to travel to Africa's newest country, South Sudan, as it began its journey towards development and the rest of the world scrambled for a piece of the pie. Their book, *Continental Shift*, is due for international release in early 2016.

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We wake early for the televised election. The Afex River Camp, situated on the banks of the White Nile, passes for luxury in the world's newest capital. Fist-sized insects thwack against our US\$125-per-night containers, where we lie like refrigerated produce. We disable our phone alarms and stumble into the bilious light of a parking lot. CNN blares in the shadows on the far side.

It is a Wednesday in November, during one of those weeks that creak under the weight of historical significance. As we enter the kitchenette belonging to the International Republican Institute, the Grand US Republican Party's pet non-governmental organisation, vote counting is already underway for the contest between President Barack Obama and his challenger, Mitt Romney. A day later, China's 18th Party Congress will begin the process of installing Xi Jinping as its new leader, determining the course of the world's second largest economy for the coming decade. In Juba, principal city of

a recently independent South Sudan, these events seem both portentous and menacing. Geopolitical alliances here shift with the inclement weather.

"South Africans!" says Billy, brightly, when we enter the boardroom. "My drinking buddies from Iraq were South Africans!" Billy is one of the Republican faithful, an army reservist and psychological operations specialist whose halcyon days were spent in Mosul. "A free-fire zone, man!" he says of the place. "No cameras, no media. Just us and the bad guys."

Here, Billy is a babysitter for the young Americans who preach freedom and democracy to President Salva Kiir's ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). As we eat our way through egg sandwiches and hash browns, the Electoral College numbers pile up for the Democrat incumbent, and the mood in the room sours.

"Our job is to help build capacity for legislators, and to try encourage working, functional opposition parties,"



Juba, principal city of recently independent South Sudan.

says James Turitto, Resident Programme Officer, and the morning's chief egg fryer. "We're very close to the SPLM. So when senior members tell us they're going to Beijing for 10 days, it's a little tough for us to swallow. Truthfully, USAID and State are worried about the path the SPLM are taking. You could see how China would appeal to them."

Conversely, we can see how South Sudan would appeal to the Chinese, the Americans, and the dozens of others circling the region with vulpine intent. "Everyone wants a piece of the pie that is Juba, South Sudan," wrote Kenyan investigative journalist Wanjohi Kabukuru in a paper published by Norwegian People's Aid.

Since independence from Sudan on 9 July, 2011, Kiir's government has been locked in a dispute over oil revenues with Khartoum, a stalemate that's led to the cessation of oil exports and the implosion of the economy. Oil, when it is pumping, traditionally accounts for 98% of the South Sudanese budget. But oil is only one element in the dizzying compound of economic possibilities that South Sudan represents. There is almost no infrastructural development here: few paved roads; no electricity grid; a non-existent sanitation system.

### Independence referendum

The vacuum promises untold riches. According to a 48-page dossier titled *The New Frontier*, commissioned by Norwegian People's Aid and written by David Kuol Mading,

the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between north and south in 2005 kicked off a land grab. Foreign interests now control 5.74 million hectares of land in the South Sudanese agribusiness sector alone – almost 9% of the country's landmass. South African companies have had a field day: SAB Miller pumped R354 million into South Sudan Beverages Limited (tagline: "The taste of progress"), while PetroSA purchased oil concessions, and Global Engineering Consortium SA signed a R180 million contract with the Sudan Railway Corporation.

Politically, the players with the largest stake, when the two Sudans are taken as a piece, are the Chinese and the Americans. While the CPA was largely a result of consistent American pressure, the independence referendum in January 2011 could never have happened without the Chinese conceding to its inevitability. China has for years owned controlling stakes in Sudan's big energy consortiums, and thus could expect roughly 60% of the 490,000 barrels of oil that flowed to Port Sudan through pipelines they had built and maintained.

The questions become more urgent by the day: how will South Sudan's fledgling government manage the feeding frenzy? Whose sphere of influence will they enter? When will the oil start flowing? And will the people of this battered nation get a chance to reap the rewards of an independence that cost millions of lives and decades of darkness?

Meanwhile, on the flat screen at the head of the boardroom, Wolf Blitzer makes it clear that the numbers have all but sunk Romney's campaign.

"Fuck it," says Billy, standing. "I'm going to put in an order for a thousand rounds of ammo."

The architecture, if you can call it that, is minutely descriptive. The Ministry of Petroleum is a mirrored gangster palace-cum-70s Baghdad nightclub, with tight security and a consigliere in a fine suit who barks, when we enter, "What is your agenda?" At the Ministry of Industry and Commerce we find no security and compact, welcoming buildings. The Ministry of Wildlife resembles a bombed-out park.

In office after office, while we wait for interviews that will never happen, we get reminders of the morning's election. Obama's victory speech – "you reaffirmed the spirit that has triumphed over War and Depression, the spirit that has lifted this country from the depths of despair to the great heights of hope" – has already been downloaded as a ringtone. In Juba, democracy is a powerful brand, but a bitch to implement.

If there is anyone here who properly understands this, who can pick at the myriad threads that bind and knot his country into an impenetrable tangle, it must be Lumumba Stanislaus-Kaw Di-Aping. Known to South African journalists as the man who once unofficially represented the SPLM in Pretoria, and to the world's press as the diplomat who engineered a breakaway of African states at the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference (when he was chief negotiator for the so-called G77 bloc and China), Di-Aping is currently in charge of his country's development vision.

His liberal-humanist bona fides are impressive – stints at Yale, at Oxford, at the United Nations and McKinsey & Co. Although he was the architect, with the assistance of George Soros, of the hundred million dollar Climate Green Fund, he drew the ire of the West for comparing its climate policy to the Holocaust, and for “ask[ing] Africa to sign a suicide pact, an incineration pact, in order to maintain the economic dominance of a few countries”. He faced down President Obama over the negotiating table, and did not blink.

As for his own homeland, Di-Aping is no less resolute. “There is no such thing as reconstruction in South Sudan,” he says. “We have only construction. We have no powerful vested interests that can impede a developmental state the way South Africa's transformation plan was scattered. Ideologically, we have no power struggles within the movement, such as there are in the ANC.”

### Performance-oriented leadership

We have met him at an outdoor café in downtown Juba, where it appears to us that the broader vested interests are on full display – NGO-types vying for tables with Chinese businessmen, local politicians whispering lest they be heard by American ears – but we take his point: compared to South Africa's ruling party, the SPLM is a paragon of virtuous unity. Di-Aping's contention is that neither the market fundamentalists nor the socialists within his party are strong enough to dictate policy, and that given the tabula rasa before him, what needs to be emulated are the blueprints of countries like Botswana and Mauritius.

He speaks of ordinary citizens taking precedence over the demands of big capital, of performance-oriented leadership, of an autonomous bureaucracy manipulated neither by the market nor by politics. For Di-Aping, the per capita prosperity of Botswana and Mauritius is

important mainly in hindsight-what was critical when those African exemplars were coming up was how they managed to spread the wealth. “Luckily enough,” he says, “in South Sudan we own the oil resources. Now we need to orient that towards the vision.”

Hesitating for a moment, Di-Aping then opens his laptop, and invites us to have a look at a document. This, he explains, is the manifesto for South Sudanese development; we are among the first outsiders to see it.



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A town that swells by the day, thumping with the noise of generators for a few raucous hours after dusk.

Due to be endorsed in December 2012, he says, it will inform three things: all of South Sudan's development processes, its entire project of state formation, and its constitutional framework going forward.

The writing in the 33-page document, which was overseen by a committee of seven, was done mostly by the man before us – in the context of the greed and misery we've already witnessed on Juba's streets, it soon becomes apparent that we've been given access to a profoundly beautiful (if profoundly ambitious) growth plan.

Di-Aping scrolls through the pages until he arrives at a certain paragraph, which he asks us to read aloud: "The mission of the SPLM is to construct a knowledge economy in South Sudan and to build a nation and society that is inspired by peace, freedom, justice, unity, prosperity and progress. The SPLM will ensure democracy under the rule of law and good governance, to safeguard fundamental human, economic, social, cultural and religious rights and freedoms. Through the people, SPLM shall govern."

The question is obvious: a knowledge economy in a country with one of the lowest literacy rates on Earth, where barely a quarter of the populace is able to read and write?

"The only way ahead for South Sudan is through a massive educational programme," says Di-Aping. "This is the difference between where Africa went wrong and where the Asian tiger economies went right. You cannot think of creating opportunities when the majority of your people are illiterate, I don't care whose theories you've read. Okay?"

According to Di-Aping, its late admittance as an independent state has given South Sudan the opportunity to learn from the developing world's mistakes – and what it's learned is that where education hasn't been a priority, only suffering has been harvested. He rejects the assertion that his country lacks 'capacity', countering that whatever the term means, no nation in history ever started off with it. "What we need," he says, "is the will and the wit."

### **The developing world's mistakes**

It's the country's vast pool of youth, Di-Aping continues, that's at the core of the manifesto. South Sudan's thousands of young, returning exiles—the so-called Lost Boys, who in the '80s and '90s trekked on foot across the border, receiving their secondary education in refugee camps, gaining admittance to universities in the United States – have been earmarked to haul the rest of the nation up. It will be up to them to erect what the SPLM recognises as

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the Five Pillars: mass education; effective petroleum and mining management; sustainable agriculture and climate change policies; infrastructural development; financial and industrial growth.

Later, while we're taking cover from a torrential downpour, Di-Aping stresses the urgency of getting this vision squared away. "We understand how the West plays the game – that's old hat. As for the Chinese, the only way you manage them is after you have everything spelt out. Otherwise? Otherwise they'll finish you."

It's a Saturday afternoon in Unity State, the oil-rich province on the border with Sudan, and James Adiok Mayik is once again quoting John Garang. Killed in a helicopter crash in 2005, South Sudan's liberation icon is never far from the thoughts of the country's intelligentsia. Adiok, recently returned from Portland, Oregon, more than fits the bill – armed with a Master of Education, he is exactly the caste of young leader of whom Di-Aping spoke.

"Bring the town to the people," he intones, as we lounge on the concrete roof of our bare-bones hotel, "not the people to the town."

Like most of his ilk, Adiok's Lost Boy history began when he was in his early teens, and his life is marked with violence and hardship. A firstborn Nuer herder who was never meant to enter a schoolhouse, he was forced to walk barefoot across the country, finding refuge in Kenya. Ironically, without the war, Adiok would not have learned to read and write. Now, he teaches teachers how to teach.

Garang's quote, which Adiok repeats twice for effect, pumps through the veins of local thought-leaders – it implies a decentralised system of governance, where service delivery to the rural areas slows the pace of urbanisation that has all but destroyed many African states. Still, the pull of petroleum is irresistible, and Unity State illuminates the oppositional forces at work in South Sudan.

Bentiu, for instance. A town that swells by the day, thumping with the noise of generators for a few raucous hours after dusk. Standing at midnight in its starlit,

sewage-lined streets, in a preternatural quiet that speaks to the lack of basic 20th century amenities, we come to understand the scale of the country's challenges.

### Fully demarcated

The governor of Unity State is an ex-warlord named Taban Deng Gai – according to a local civil rights activist who speaks to us on condition of anonymity, he's "not only the most corrupt man in South Sudan, but in all of Africa". Deng, who has been absent from his state for almost three months, is currently paying a visit to his heavily fortified bush camp. With him, we have it on good authority, are his deputies, come to provide reports on the latest events.

He is unlikely to receive much good news. After Chevron found oil near Bentiu in 1981, Sudan's then president, Jafaar Nimieri – who in 1983 rekindled hostilities between the Muslim north and Christian/animist south by introducing Sharia law – tried to push the nominal border as far back as possible. Unity was thus rendered a permanent frontline, and in arming proxies and stoking inter- and intra-ethnic grievances, Khartoum froze the area in the Stone Age.

At its quietest, the state writhes with political and ethnic tension. In many regions, particularly in the restive north, where the border has yet to be fully demarcated, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has scant authority, and roving rebel commanders have enormous sway. Characterising the war as a conflict between north and south becomes almost laughably reductive – Deng himself was variously aligned with Khartoum, the SPLA, and a range of splinter groups. The alliances, broken, renewed, or otherwise, resemble the plot of a particularly convoluted soap opera.

Partly in preparation for our trip to South Sudan, we met in October with China's Special Envoy to Africa, Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, at the Foreign Ministry in Beijing. The ambassador's brief has always focused (some might say to a disproportionate degree) on the Sudan issue; his predecessor, Liu Guijin, was instrumental in brokering talks with then Chinese premier Hu Jintao and Sudan's Omar al-Bashir, a dialogue that led directly to the independence referendum.

"Africa used to buy expensive and sell cheap," Ambassador Zhong told us. "Now, they sell expensive and buy cheap."

He was referring to the unprecedented opportunities that an oil price of US\$100 a barrel presents to South



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Sudan, and his outlook reflects a key difference in how China and the West view the region. Seen through Beijing's lens, the country is in a far better position than China was after the Cultural Revolution, when commodity prices were at an historic low. Ambassador Zhong made it clear that, for him, South Sudan is a universe of potential. Whereas from Washington's perspective, the country is not much more than a basket case, a backwater in need of nursing and aid.

Ambassador Zhong assured us that negotiations were underway to turn the oil taps back on. By the time we arrive in Bentiu, his words have proved prescient: the pipelines are being flushed, and the lifeblood might flow as soon as December, or January, or some other point in the not-too-distant future.

### Sell expensive and buy cheap

On the Sunday following our arrival Adiok arranges a 4x4, an armed guard, and an audience with the local security chief. We are allowed to proceed along the path of the buried pipeline, through swampy wastelands, to the refinery of the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company, 40% owned by the China National Petroleum Corporation.

A few kilometres beyond a bridge that al-Bashir's warplanes failed to bomb in April, the craters lying

muddy and deep by the side of the road, we stop for lunch. “This place used to be beautiful when the oil was flowing,” Adiok informs us – although amid the stench and the torpor, it’s hard to imagine how.

Forty minutes later, we’re inside an aluminium compound, in conversation with a local superintendent. We are led to a second compound, where the refinery’s Chinese production manager appears less than thrilled to see us. “But they are looking for Chinese investment in Africa,” says the superintendent. “That is you!”

Laughter all round. And then there are six men at the production manager’s door, two large members of the project’s security detail having just joined the fray. The production manager is thus rescued, allowed to return to his Sunday rest. We are led away and mildly interrogated. Who are we? What do we want? The large men, almost sympathetic to our story, in the end play it safe. Like everyone else in Unity State, they are pawns in a geopolitical game. The rules at this refinery are determined by Beijing, by Khartoum, and – still only last – by Juba.

That night, on a TV hanging in a boma in a Bentiu hotel, we watch news of the highway being built between South Sudan and Kenya, with help from China Exim Bank. A contingent arrives on November 15, to hasten negotiations. Adiok sighs.

“There you go,” he says.

For his part, Adiok doesn’t equivocate. “The war smashed our way of life,” he says. “We need to heal. What good will come of people going to the city? What will they do there?”

## Security detail

The feeding frenzy will continue, as will the struggle for South Sudan’s soul. Shortly before our arrival, the creation of the country’s new capital is announced: according to the *Sudan Tribune*, the Pan-China Construction Group will fund and build a glittering modern metropolis from the nothingness of Ramciel, which lies in the dead centre of the country.

There is an all too apt parable lurking in the news of Ramciel. As the nascent United States of America did with Washington DC, South Sudan will fashion a fresh government seat to echo its fresh democracy. Except that here, construction comes at the behest of the Chinese. Ideals versus pragmatics: the curse of the post-modern liberation movement.

What would John Garang, who wanted to bring the town to the people, say about Ramciel, about Bentiu, about Juba, about the 18 months following independence?