

# BOOK REVIEW

**Daniel Akech Thiong.** *The Politics of Fear in South Sudan: Generating Chaos, Creating Conflict.* London: Zed Books, 2021. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 217 pp. \$39.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1786996794.

As the number, scope, and intensity of interstate conflicts continue to increase, along with the complexities arising from the challenges added by climate change, the crisis with multilateralism, and the problems facing liberal peacebuilding efforts, understanding the underlying causes of conflicts is becoming ever more crucial.

Daniel Akech Thiong's book *The Politics of Fear in South Sudan: Generating Chaos, Creating Conflict* effectively introduces policymakers, practitioners, and scholars of peace and conflict to the framework of "Politics of Fear," which can be used to analyze the conflict in South Sudan. The book skillfully builds on the previous works of Hungarian scholar Frank Furedi (1997), Doctors without Borders (2017), and South Sudanese journalist Bol Aken (2018), who have applied the politics of fear in other contexts. It is part of a well-organized publication series by the International African Institute which seeks to unravel contemporary development challenges in Africa.

Using the theory of security dilemma, the author succeeds in showing how the manipulation by the elite of the structural weaknesses of South Sudan, such as poverty and illiteracy, is used to harness political, economic, or ethnic fear. This fear results in a dilemma that either bundles the communities together or sows seeds of animosity that further divide communities. The seemingly recurrent and vicious circle of the politics of fear hinders any meaningful resolutions to the conflict in South Sudan. The book also illustrates how challenges such as corruption, nepotism, misinformation, and ethnicity have crippled the young nation's efforts toward state building and plunged it into protracted conflict.

Using historical examples, the author expounds on the actors and factors that have led to the origin and evolution of a politics of fear in South Sudan. These include the Anya nya autonomy movement of 1955–1983 and the SPLM/A struggles of 1983–2011, as well as the challenges of the new government through constant violent ruptures and the IGAD process mediation


challenges onward. The author also has an important addendum on how social media has fed into a decades-long politics of fear, significantly transforming the conflict, especially through propaganda, intercommunal animosity, and mass violence.

Daniel Thiong innovatively stretches the security dilemma theory, applying it efficiently and effectively to explain its intricacies among the different actors within the state of South Sudan (for example, government agents versus the opposition/insurgencies). Classical security dilemma applies more naturally to a state-versus-state kind of competition, where it helps to explain more clearly the security maximization efforts that often result in less security for all. Security maximization for states, which are perceived to ultimately seek domination, might not necessarily have the intention of one state taking over the other state; as the author has clearly shown, the competition among various factions within a state mainly seek to monopolize state instruments of power and entrench oppressive rule over the other factions. We must therefore ask follow-up questions when we use a security dilemma framework to assess the rivalry among internal state factions. For instance, what kind of security are the actors seeking? Is it essential security for survival or just for some political, economic, or even social goals? For whom is the security meant? Is it security for the state (South Sudan), or security for the tribal and regional factions? In this case, the Dinka and the Nuer seem to seek to outdo each other in their attempts to monopolize state power and dominate.

However, the central argument of the author to analyze the impacts of the politics of fear in South Sudan through the lens of security dilemma theory almost fizzles out when he throws in a number of other theories that do not necessarily support the main argument. The author falls into the trap of attempting to explain every fracture of the South Sudan conflict; he wanders into the greed-grievance theory (24) to shed light on the differences around resources; hysteresis theory (28) for the history of political rent-seeking; and patrimonial theory/neopatrimonialism for the struggle for autonomy (29–30). However, the general use of these theoretical perspectives enriches the author's ideas about the conflict and help to show the main tensions that exist in understanding the security dilemma by the main actors (Nuer-Dinka) in the conflict.

Is the role of external actors purely destructive? Pinning South Sudan's decades of crises to individual tribal and regional politics of fear and resource embezzlement misses the other dimensions of the conflict, such as the devastating effects of climate change and non-state armed actors. It also gives the inaccurate impression that politics of fear and outright embezzlement of resources as well as other leadership excesses are institutionalized in South Sudan. This idea might be an exaggeration, as one must consider the various peace agreements and the re-organization of South Sudan's government, some of which are properly mediated and signed by the conflicting parties, in

which they agree to end violence and commit to prudent management of South Sudan. One can only hope that they will be successful.

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