

Are our Politicians Paying Close Attention to the News Media in the Country?

I have no “beef” with the VP [Machar] for not remembering me. But what I have a “beef” with, clearly, has to do with why is it that our politicians do not give a damn about what writers stay up all night long writing in order to draw their attention and to connect them with their constituents? So, the compelling question is: where does the VP get his news from since it’s self-evidence that he cares less about the media?—By Luk Kuoth Dak, a former anchorman at Juba Radio.

By PaanLuel Wel, Washington DC, USA.

In the article “[Between Riek Machar, Daniel Abushery Daniel and me!](#),” Luk Dak, the author, wonders why it is, it appears, the case that “our politicians *do not* give a damn about what writers stay up all night long writing in order to draw their attention and to connect them with their constituents.” As someone among the said writers diligently burning the midnight oil to draw our leaders' and politicians' attention to the most pressing issues of the day in our country, as well as to connect them with the urgent problems, needs and aspirations of their respective constituents, I have been thinking too about Mr. Dak's poignant question, trying to decipher, if any, the reason why it is apparently the case!

The revelation that some of our leading politicians might not be paying deserving attention to the news media came from a midnight conversation between the author, Mr. Dak and Dr. Machar, the Vice President of the Republic of South Sudan. According to the aforementioned article, Mr. Dak, upon obtaining the VP's cell phone number from Daniel Abushery—his cousin, rang up the Big Man, Dr. Machar, who happened to have been in town on a private jaunt. Although Mr. Dak haven't made us privy to the reason (s) he was calling the VP, it is safe for me to surmise here that it might have been on national matters, the VP being a public servant, and hence, owe it unto the citizenry what and how things are churning up in Juba city.

But the conversation never took up, at least as per the gist of the article. The VP, either because he was too sleepy—which could be a plausible reason—or totally ignorant of the caller identity—as the author seems to have concluded—never recognized nor recalled Mr. Dak's names or identity. Mr. Dak's attempts to remind the Big Man that he is a well-read South Sudanese columnist, a former anchorman at Juba radio and a former press secretary to Daniel Koat Mathews (D.K.) or even about a visit the author had paid him at his hotel room some years back, all did not bore any fruit. The VP was categorically honest: “Sorry sir, I don't remember you! Please leave me alone to enjoy my sweet sleep” to paraphrase what might have been going on in the Big Man's sleepy mind.

That the VP could not recall him was both bamboozling as well as being outrageous to and for Mr. Dak! This was for two main reasons. Professionally, Mr. Dak is a public figure in his own right, having been a radio anchorman in Juba and being currently an ardent observer and weekly columnist on South Sudan important subject. On personal level, Mr. Dak is someone who has met Dr. Machar before, possibly on more than one occasion, and even gave him a book as a gift. Mr. Dak, as he explains in the article, had come to “his defense when [the VP] was subjected to a barrage of some vicious attacks by some journalists from the Bor area over his (admitted)

responsibility on the tragic massacre in Bor in 1990” and even “most recently lauded the VP for coming out clean, and by publicly taking responsibility for his actions against innocent civilians in Bor.”

If the VP could not know nor recalled such kind of a close friend and a supporter, Mr. Dak reasons, who could he possibly know and remember? Secondly, here is the No. 2 most powerful individual in the entire country, if he could not have read about the articles written and posted on all the major media outlets in the republic of South Sudan: “so, the compelling question is: where does the VP get his news from since it’s self-evidence that he cares less about the media?” From that illuminating question, it is crystal clear that Mr. Dak conclusion is that Dr. Machar is either not remotely interested in reading news on South Sudan media or is either too busy or lazy to find time to read them.

But Mr. Gordon Buay, in his "Dear Nuer" message on the SPLM-Diaspora Forum, takes a different view. In his opinion, it is not that the VP does not care to read the news; it is rather that “Riek Machar is not a good reader and he is intellectually behind the rest of the world for 10 years.” Mr. Buay goes on to declare that:

“In the entire SPLM/A High Command, the good readers are John Garang and Lam Akol who used to travel with books even in frontlines. Any good reader who talks to Riek Machar will find him very boring and a waste of time. But when you talk to John Garang or Lam Akol, you will discover that their brains are full of knowledge. You cannot be a good writer without reading and you cannot know things without reading many books in every field.”

While Mr. Buay’s claim would be hard to corroborate—someone need to [have] call up Dr. John Garang and/or Dr. Lam in the middle of the night to verify if they could remember the caller and recall some of the articles written about them on South Sudan’s media—it, nevertheless, once more reinforces Mr. Dak’s earlier analysis of and conclusion on Dr. Machar’s tepid relationship to the written/printed words.

But for the sake of the argument, let me first grant that Dr. John Garang was a crafty politician who was capable of making a big deal out of nothing—and everything—to gain a political mileage over his real and perceived political opponents. And secondly, that Dr. Lam—the calculative-in-chief—could have just pretended to remember or know Mr. Dak to avoid appearing “not in the know.” After all, Dr. Lam is a learned man: who said that a learned man must not know the exact location of a needle in a haystack? Evidently, it appears that the VP honesty (if you are his supporter) or naivety (if you are his critic) generated the wrath he incurred from Mr. Dak and Mr. Buay.

But is it really accurate and warranting to judge and condemn the man—Dr. Machar—on just one incidence? Does failure to read or recall anything from South Sudan media necessarily translate into not being an avid observer of South Sudanese affairs? Does the VP failure to recognize Mr. Dak and his articles automatically mean that he may not be reading other South Sudanese commentators, online newsletters, printed newspapers in Juba, or even international news which might be worth his taste, considering the pathetic state of our news media in general?

In essence, is our news media safe enough for our decision makers to consume without poisoning their minds, rendering them national bigots and serial tribalists like most commentators are on [Sudan Tribune](#), [South Sudan News Agency](#), [South Sudan Nation](#), [Gurtong](#), [Borglobe](#), [New Sudan Vision](#) etc?

Whatever the case and the circumstances in question might be, there is no doubt that our politicians need the media to reach the public and to receive informative and correctional feedbacks from their constituents. Although the ruling class and the media do have an antagonistic relationship sometimes, I still wholeheartedly concur with Mr. Dak's observation that "the news media can be a very important tool for direction and guidance for anyone in a public office" because "the news media provide [them] with a mirror that reflects what [their] administrations has done right, [and] of where it fell short of" the public expectations. Indeed, in this age of modern technology, our politicians have no lame excuse, whatsoever, not to access the news media.

While that might be the case, the kind and the extent of the news media in question do still matter to both the politicians and the public. It is arguable to note that most South Sudanese news media contain nothing but mere divisive personal opinions from unreliable writers. Do we expect the honorable VP to faithfully keep track of such stupendously personalized and tribalized vendettas? Of course not, unless we wanna poison his mind and spoil his decision-making ability on pertinent national matters. In other words, it is comfortingly safe and reassuringly better for the VP to be entirely oblivion to and ignorant of the bad news media for the sake of the nation and the welfare of its people.

Moreover, it is hard to make the case that our news media do actually and accurately reflect public expressions from the rural constituents on most issues. Much of the written, opinionated commentaries and reporting do originate from the Diaspora community who have no access to much of the reality on the ground other than rumors and "bush telephoning." For the politicians to rely on such limited facts in their decision makings and personal deliberations would be a national tragedy because there is a great mismatch between what our infant news media carries and the actual reality on the ground. Therefore, our VP tentative avoidance of the news media might be a premeditated move, taken in the best interest of the nation itself.

Thirdly, the VP is a learned man, with a PhD in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Bradford, UK. Even if it is granted that he has not been reading news from South Sudanese media, it may not inescapably be the case that he has not been reading at all. For one, [Kuormedit](#) could still be more interested in his Engineering books, which are, of course, of more urgent utility to our underdeveloped and war-ravaged young nation. Won't it be a great honor to have the VP as the chief engineer for the new national city of Ramciel (say Rhamchieel)? Secondly, [Kuormedit](#) could be reading international news and reports about South Sudan to gauge the opinions of the citizens and make appropriate decisions. Why international news? Simply because he might not have any faith in the local news media.

But most importantly, do we really want those leaders who have been reading, often selectively, from South Sudan news media? To illustrate that point further, consider the remarks President Kiir made in Washington DC in his 2009 visit to the USA in which he ended up threatening

people critical of his government on the internet. If I could recalled, his threat was to the effect that whoever pens those critical articles must remember that he/she will one day be in South Sudan and the government would call him/her to account for his writings. With Dr. James Okuk still languishing in prison for his political writings, I guess we the writers might be better off with more Dr. Machars who are not interested in the news media and less President Kiirs who are too inquisitively investigative!

My conclusion, though, is that, instead of reading too much ignorance in the VP's failure to recognize Mr. Dak and his writings, we should rather consider it as a strong indictment of the quality of the news media in South Sudan. It should be a wake-up call for journalists and political commentators to double their efforts and produce better news coverage that would be palatable enough to entice our 'choosy' VP!

You can reach PaanLuel Wël at paanluel2011@gmail.com, PaanLuel Wel (Facebook page), PaanLuelWel2011 (Twitter account) or through his blog account at: <http://paanluelwel2011.wordpress.com/>