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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report, part of a series of U.S. Institute of Peace reports on state building in South Sudan, focuses on how the new state will manage its cultural diversity with a view to bringing all its ethnic nationalities together, forming a national identity that can reduce the level of suspicion and ethnicity-based political rivalry. The information and analysis in this report have their roots in the author's academic research and interests, as well as his background as a civil servant in the government of South Sudan. Much of the information was generated through interviews and group discussions over a long period in the context of other studies and evaluations. Many of the opinions expressed here are a combination of newspaper editorials, news coverage in the local media, debates on Internet discussion forums, public lectures and debates, government policy briefs, and a host of other government documents pertaining to its vision, development plans, and programs aimed at addressing the myriad security challenges that confront South Sudan.

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## Jok Madut Jok

# Diversity, Unity, and Nation Building in South Sudan

## Summary

- The government of South Sudan and its development partners appear to be heavily focused on state building and less so on nation building: the question of how to turn the young state into a nation in which all South Sudanese can see themselves represented.
- Whatever projects a new country conceives, it has to view nation and state as inseparable components of the same project, not focusing too much on one without investing in the other.
- Most South Sudanese interviewed for this project assert that the most obvious impediment to national cohesion is exclusion from the national platform, especially exclusion along ethnic lines. Corruption, nepotism, and exclusion from access to government jobs were also raised as issues that the government will need to address directly for citizens to have pride in their nation.
- There is a widespread sense of worry about the viability of South Sudan as a nation due to insecurity, especially insecurity rooted in the current ethnic conflicts occurring in seven out of the ten states.
- Both political leaders and ordinary citizens recognize the importance of national unity and the equitable display and celebration of cultural diversity as a national asset; representation of all ethnic nationalities and creation of a broad-based government is central to South Sudan's transition to nationhood. The immediate challenge involves creating programs that promote citizenship in the nation over ethnic citizenship. The opaque climate of the transitional constitutional review process has not earned the government much trust from all sectors of society, and this has made for a bad start toward national consensus.
- As a multiethnic society, South Sudan also is confronted with the question of a language policy. To speed up the process of nation building, the government will need to transform current discussions on language into practical decisions regarding the development of a

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national language. Identifying five national languages that represent the three greater regions of the country would be one way to approach it.

- Ultimately, a viable South Sudan has to stand on four strong pillars: political unity, a disciplined military, quick and equitable service delivery, and a vibrant civil society.

South Sudan is coming into existence after long wars of liberation, inheriting poor infrastructure, a volatile political climate, limited capacity for governance, weak state institutions, a financial crises, violent ethnic divisions, and an uncertain regional and international political atmosphere. For some time, it thus likely will be driven more by the euphoria of independence from Sudan, the political pronouncements of its leadership, and the history of an extremely violent conflict with the north than by its practical abilities as a nation-state.

At the moment, South Sudan is only slightly more than a geographical expression. It contains more than sixty cultural and linguistic groups, each of which have a stronger sense of citizenship in their tribes than in the nation. The main glue that binds the country's multiple ethnicities together is the history of their struggle for freedom and collective opposition to the north. The most recent phase of this struggle—long and hard, under the leadership of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM)—was an experience that transcended ethnic boundaries, emphasizing unity of purpose during the war. This accelerated the concept of and conviction about separate nationhood from the north, especially leading up to the 2011 referendum on self-determination, as the dream of independence was turning into reality. Despite violent discord within the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) and the creation of ethnic militias that fought bitter wars against it, the undeniable fact is that all South Sudanese remained focused on the need for unity of purpose and ranks in their struggle for self-determination.

However, South Sudan's unity remains undefined: At independence, the country has found itself with only a hazy notion of a collective national identity beyond its unified opposition to the north, making its viability as a nation a matter of speculation. Given the history of internal political rivalries along ethnic lines, the state's inability to immediately provide the highly anticipated peace dividends and fruits of independence, as well as the violence and insecurity that is likely to accompany the mechanics of separation, there have been predictions of possible disintegration.<sup>1</sup> There have been presumptions that ethnic squabbles within South Sudan will increase over the allocation of state resources and services, which could dissipate the vague sense of national unity among the people of the new country.<sup>2</sup> Such rivalries, if not managed in the most tolerant and inclusive manner possible, could easily thwart the nation-building project. In response to these predictions, the South Sudanese political leadership, while acknowledging the challenges of building a nation from scratch, has discounted talk of failure and collapse; it has given assurances that it will deliver to the people their long-denied state services, address peoples' expectations for what independence holds, deal with corruption and insecurity, and establish a stable and unified country. But however strong the government's conviction regarding its ability to cater to its people, South Sudan will have an arduous journey to nationhood. Its development projects will need a strong foundation of security and stability, which the new state is currently short of. Will there be a need for a kind of new north—that is, an external factor that South Sudanese will need to galvanize against? Or do the South Sudanese have enough historical connections to feed the new fervor for national belonging, no matter the country's internal ethnic, political, and class differences?

## Cultural Diversity and Nationhood: A South Sudanese Debate and Worry

In early June 2011—a month before South Sudan declared itself an independent republic, and despite the violence engulfing its people from within and from without—there was

bustle in the capital, Juba, and throughout the country in preparation for independence celebrations on July 9. In May, Sudanese armed forces had attacked and occupied Abyei town, a hotly contested region on the north-south border, and there were rebel militia attacks in three states and numerous tribal conflicts in seven states—all causing renewed uncertainties among many observers about independence. But the main preoccupation of political debate in Juba was not just the anticipated independent statehood, but how to turn South Sudan into a viable nation: that is, how to turn its ethnic and cultural diversity into a useful asset, forming the colorful and unified country that everyone had yearned for since the 1940s, long before Sudan's independence from British colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

In the referendum in January 2011, South Sudanese had demonstrated their ability to unite around a single purpose, all other disagreements notwithstanding: A full 98 percent voted in favor of separation, rejecting a unified Sudan, a country that had been suffering from the woes of forced unity for over fifty years. The vote, which was part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the second round of Sudan's prolonged wars, turned a page in the long history of southern struggle for freedom and the destructive northern counterinsurgency. However, five months later—even before the nation was officially born—the euphoria after the referendum results had given way to disappointment. South Sudanese wanted an opportunity to communicate with their government on the concept of nationhood. The media were embroiled in discussions about deficiencies in the government's ability to deliver security, basic services, and above all, a sense of unity—some of the most highly anticipated peace dividends and rewards for independence. Claims of corruption, nepotism, exclusion, and domination of government and business by some ethnic groups all seemed to erode the public's enthusiasm for the upcoming transition, despite the initial excitement.

The sense of disappointment is more related to the perceived behavior of the top political class than to the national security issues that threaten the young state's sovereignty. Undoubtedly, the security of individual and property is a major concern for people: Many who were interviewed for this report spoke of it as the single most important expected peace dividend and have been most disappointed by its failure to materialize. The activities of the Khartoum government on the borders—and the invasion by its armed forces—are certainly worrying and have undoubtedly dampened the independence mood throughout South Sudan. But people believe that internal insecurity problems, especially those caused by local militias, rebel movements, and tribal warfare, are a greater threat to the new nation. These threats relate to the South Sudan government's ability to address the concerns of individual citizens: To the extent that the government indulges in exclusionary practices that allow ethnic backgrounds, rather than national policy interests, to influence decision-making processes, it jeopardizes South Sudan's future stability, unity, and development.<sup>4</sup> The forces that South Sudanese often say will threaten the transformation to nationhood are tribalism; nepotism; corruption; exclusion on ethnic, age, or gender bases; lack of meritocracy in hiring; and lack of a respectable constitution that spells out a clear social contract between government and citizens. South Sudanese realize that the current ethnic composition of the country could be a liability if it is not carefully managed, especially as it influences everyday governance. How far this worry runs through all sectors of the population, including top political leadership, will depend on how future national policies address diversity and the behavior of public officials.

Exemplifying how worried people are about South Sudan's transition to statehood was the large crowd that attended a series of lectures held at Juba University, organized by Rift Valley Institute and the university's Center for Peace and Development Studies, on the topic of culture and nation in South Sudan. The lectures raised the questions of whether South

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Sudan is ready for and capable of nationhood, and what it will take for the statehood process to happen smoothly. Other questions in this debate concerned the role of cultural diversity in development. Various institutions have organized many similar events throughout South Sudan since the January referendum, garnering much attention from ordinary citizens, government officials, and international development partners.

The discussions have made two things clear. First, most people are aware of the distinction between nation building and state building, understanding that they are related but different projects, and second, the idea of nation building is a concern of everyone throughout South Sudan. On the one hand, state building focuses on economic development, upgrading the capacity of human resources, an effective security apparatus, responsible fiscal policy, efficient service delivery, and general infrastructure. It also entails policies aimed at encouraging the growth of the private sector, including foreign investment. When people talk about nation building, on the other hand, they are often referring to a national political project that would produce a sense of national unity and collective national identity with an eye to preventing discord along ethnic lines, especially as tribal violence and its ongoing destructive legacies remain part of a collective memory among South Sudanese. Any government actions that citizens recognize as insensitive to the history of ethnic discord will automatically project ethnic bias. So a nation-building program needs to focus on citizens themselves, seeking to cultivate a strong sense of national over tribal membership. Such a program would emanate from a conviction that nations are made, not born—nor can accidents of history and geography necessarily result in a unified nation, at least not in the sense of fostering citizens' feelings of belonging and loyalty. Creating such a nation, especially in an age where no country can avoid the global limelight, requires a vision, a plan, and honest and participatory actions, not just the pronouncements of politicians and the wishes of a few dedicated nationalists. Interviewees suggest that the government and its development partners seem heavily focused on state building and less so on nation building. This represents a missed opportunity: Though they are conceptually distinct, in practice, state and nation building can be mutually reinforcing. Providing services, improving living standards, and strengthening security allows citizens to be proud of their country, just as pride in one's nation is the foundation for stability, producing an environment in which services can be provided. So whatever projects a new country conceives, it has to view nation and state as separate but inseparable components of the same project. The government cannot focus too much on one without investing in the other.

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Now that South Sudan has become a state, it also needs to become a nation. Citizens' sense of exclusion from the national platform—as in key decision making positions in the executive branch of government—media, government programs, and access to services cannot be allowed to grow. The euphoria of independence will be accompanied by the challenges of building a new nation, a project that will have to go beyond the usual temptation of focusing on material and infrastructure development as well as delivery of basic social services. These are all important and expected dividends of independence, but it will be near impossible to meet citizens' expectations if South Sudan fails to become a nation. So far, the struggle for freedom from the grip of the Khartoum government has been the most unifying force for South Sudanese. Now that this struggle has borne fruit and there is no more north to blame, what will unite South Sudanese is the desire to build a nation with a shared identity. Such a collective identity will need to be politically constructed, and it is the task of its leadership, government, civil society, and private enterprise to do it by turning South Sudan's cultural diversity into a national asset.

Under normal circumstances, diversity is celebrated as a source of strength and enrichment of the human endeavor; such an approach in South Sudan will signify a discourse of hope and togetherness. Anything short of this will reflect a discourse of hegemony,

exclusion, and assumptions of homogeneity. To go in for the latter is to make diversity a liability and a hazard, creating a discourse of discord. In the worst circumstances, it can be a discourse of rejection. To view diversity as a threat, as the Islamist government in Khartoum did regarding southerners, is to condemn difference and position otherness as a rationale for stigmatization.

The current discourse found in the South Sudan government's policies is inclusive and broad-based, and at least as a matter of policy, there has been a collective agreement to begin constructing the nation's identity. This agreement emanates from an apparent conviction that the lack of unifying symbols in the face of ethnic and cultural diversity is an impediment to national unity. Historically, and given the strong ethnic loyalties within South Sudan, the most significant enemy of the country's cohesion, national loyalty, and citizen pride will be the currently widespread suspicion of ethnicity-based exclusion from the national platform and other aspects of South Sudanese national life. This same sense of exclusion is one of the most important factors in South Sudan leaving Sudan, and authorities are keen not to practice the same policies.

At the same time, however, some government officials have tended to engage in exclusionary practices—or at least the public perceives that they do—and these have in the past been based on ethnic differences. If these practices continue in the new South Sudan, any citizen who feels excluded will never develop that important sense of pride in nation. A starting point to addressing the feeling of exclusion is for the government to state the obvious: that South Sudan belongs to all South Sudanese, and not to any ethnic, religious, or political group. Putting this simple fact into action in distributing the nation's resources and in governance generally, the government has gone on record to state that the whole country must address itself to identifying, documenting, preserving, displaying, promoting, and celebrating the cultural practices that are common to all South Sudanese. According to this policy commitment, the religious practices, dancing arts, marriage systems, indigenous languages, natural environment, and unique ecological zones inhabited by dozens of South Sudanese ethnic nationalities must be celebrated as a mix of symbols that bind together the people of South Sudan, making it unique and yet similar to the rest of black Africa.

Culturally diverse countries also confront the challenge of finding symbols for their people to rally around that transcend their ethnic, linguistic, and political differences. Right now, South Sudan seems most divided by its lack of an indigenous national language, and the government is discussing this rather urgently. South Sudan might follow the experiences of other, similarly diverse countries in developing a national language, whether it creates a hybrid of a number of local languages, drawing from the Indonesian model, or adopts English as the language of government, business, and education. Others have suggested that five languages should be selected from the three main regions of the country. In each of these regions, the majority of the people speak languages that could be elevated to the national level. In Upper Nile, Nuer is the language of the majority and could be one of the national languages from that region. Dinka is the majority language in greater Bahr el-Ghazal, as are Bari, Latuka, and Zande, which are spoken by the majority of people in the region of Equatoria. But developing these national languages does not mean that the small languages would be allowed to die off; their use at a local level would be encouraged. The project of selecting national-level languages will require open dialogue with all South Sudanese communities, perhaps by commissioning a survey to solicit ideas from a cross-section of communities. Linking the language policy to the educational curriculum, all indigenous languages could be taught in primary school up to, say, the third grade, after which English could take over as the medium of instruction. This would result in the majority of people, especially the urban and educated population, being trilingual—in the national language, English, and a special version of Arabic that has already begun to function as a lingua franca across South Sudan.

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Lack of a unifying language does not mean that South Sudan cannot develop as a unified nation, but failure to address the issue will surely slow down the speed of its development. Having a national language would lessen feelings of exclusion and domination by one or few ethnic groups—not to mention that people could communicate across ethnic boundaries more easily, easing conflict and alleviating suspicions of domination and favoritism. Consider what might happen in government offices when two officials from one ethnic background speak to each other in their native tongue in the presence of members of other ethnic groups; it can be quite upsetting for those who do not understand that particular language, and the use of tribal language might suggest that the officials are conspiring about something they do not want the others to understand. How to deal with this issue is currently one of the debates in government circles—that is, whether there might be a need for legislation that prohibits conducting official business in a language other than the official language of government.

Another major obstacle to realizing the dream of nationhood is ethnic conflict, which has some of its roots in the above mentioned feelings of exclusion or domination of the state by some ethnic groups. The people of South Sudan have lived with internal conflict for some time, but in recent decades the strife has become more gruesome due to a combination of feelings of exclusion, diminishing resources, and the long hands of the powers to the north. A country seeking unity, collective national identity, and stability must have a clear policy to combat this violence. When the people of South Sudan have historically competed for resources—especially pastoral peoples—these purely economic conflicts have been easily reconcilable through traditional mechanisms. To foster these types of reconciliation practices and rebuild relations of mutual interest, attempts are under way to highlight significant events in history that celebrate South Sudan's mechanisms of indigenous justice. The Ministry of Culture and Heritage has deemed it important to chronicle, preserve, and display how spiritual leaders have used religious practices and rituals to stem violence. Some of the ministry's activities include establishing a museum of prophecy, to be erected at the prophet Ngun Deng's shrine in Jonglei state. This museum will move Ngun Deng's ideas to the center stage, showing that they had much in common with other similar Nilotic prophets, such as Ariathdit in Gogrial or Lirpiu in Bor. This emphasis on religious heritage underscores the power of spiritual leaders as moral compasses for South Sudanese communities, on par with Christianity or any other religion.

Another strategy may be to review and develop the national educational curriculum for primary through secondary school so that Christianity or any other religion of the book is taught side by side with local spiritual ideas. This could prevent the younger generation of South Sudanese from shunning the spiritual beliefs of their ancestors as signs of backwardness, as some have already begun to do. For such a program to take hold, it will need to be a collaborative endeavor between the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, local authorities, and civil society groups. The traditional spiritual beliefs do not compete with other religions but are tolerant and accommodating, and South Sudanese can learn a great deal from them in their efforts to coexist. The current government has made a commitment to the idea that its history, including traditional beliefs, has to be imparted to its younger generations if they are to become proud citizens of the new country. Most of the leading figures in South Sudan's political class have pronounced that a nation that does not commemorate and celebrate its past surely cannot know where it is headed.<sup>5</sup>

In attempting to address regional and ethnic diversity through governance, however, the leadership finds itself in a dilemma. The leaders who created the system of governance thought best to decentralize South Sudan's political system, dividing the country into ten states. The purpose of this system had to do with state building—that is, having equitable administration of each of the ten states, as services and power could be shared and brought

nearer to the people. But in such a diverse country, the system works at cross purposes with nation building: It is difficult to see how it ensures integration, as states might feel isolated from one another and each one could pursue its own course. This requires the institution of national bodies that link the states together, functioning as a platform for communication and interaction.

## History as National Identity

Ever since the country we now know as Sudan came into existence, the people living in its southern half have had more commonalities between them than differences, and they are different from the northern population in several significant ways. The similarities among southern ethnic groups have included modes of production and livelihood, religious traditions, and culture in general. They also include important shared historical experiences—especially regarding contact with the outside world and the effects of slavery, the colonial order, and the protracted wars between north and south. For South Sudanese, the struggle that culminated in independence is now officially recognized as a nearly 200-year struggle against foreign occupation and domination. State medals will now carry the official historical timeline between 1821, when Muhammad Ali, the viceroy of the Ottoman Sultan in Egypt, sent an expedition to invade Sudan in search of slaves and ivory, and 2011, the year South Sudan gained independence. Professional historians will go on debating whether or not the Turkiyya (1820–81), the Mahdiyya (1881–98), the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1898–1956), and the state of independent Sudan (1956–2011) had interconnected policies of oppression that would make the people of South Sudan view them as one continuum of colonization. But this narrative is now South Sudan’s state history; there is an official historical conclusion that the new country, united or not, was a colony of all these powers, and has just now ended foreign rule to emerge independent and united by its history of struggle. This official line is intended to shape the historical experience with a view to asserting the claim to oneness of all South Sudanese. “We are one people, if not by genealogy, then by lived experienced,” remarked Vincent, a social researcher from Western Equatoria in an interview. The policy is meant to preempt and offset any claims that a country as diverse as South Sudan would have no foundation upon which to build a sense of nationhood.

That said, unity among South Sudanese historically has been based more on how different they are from northerners than on the commonalities among them. These differences have been cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and racial. The official policy of the Khartoum government, starting at the end of British colonialism, attempted to homogenize Sudan and create an Arab country. Many South Sudanese have remarked that these policies aimed at doing away with diversity altogether, as it proved a stumbling block to the Arabization project. For their part, many Khartoum officials have remarked that, since various South Sudanese ethnic nations use Arabic to communicate across linguistic boundaries, Arabic should become the only national language. This may be true, but it does not necessarily follow that South Sudanese are Arabs. “We also speak English, but we have never claimed that we are English people,” suggested Manyang, a journalist, in an interview. The story well known to most learned South Sudanese is that all successive governments took Khartoum and the areas around it as the center of the country in every sense of the word, and with this view, the Khartoum-based state was built on policies of exclusion from cultural representation, resources, and political power. Khartoum sought coercive unity, using both outright violence and more underhanded tactics, such as the propagation of Arab culture in state media.

Thus South Sudan’s official history is a history from the perspective of victimhood, politically refashioned over time to make a case for dissent by aggrieved areas peripheral to the

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central region. In addition to concentrating development and basic services in Sudan's central area, the Khartoum government actively promoted Arab and Islamic culture at the expense of the various cultural practices that the rest of the country was made of. The result was that South Sudan and other peripheries of the country increasingly felt that this cultural, ethnic, or racial exclusion was the basis for exclusion from the distribution of the national pie, basic services, and political power. The people of the south, or southerners, as they increasingly came to be referred to and self-identified, found themselves needing to forge a unity of convenience—that is, a unity driven by the need for a collective effort to deal with the negative experiences imposed on them by the Arab-dominated Khartoum governments.

The need and opportunity for unity existed even during the colonial period. The scourge of slavery, because it affected all southerners regardless of their ethnic affiliation, forced them to create a unified front and disregard the differences among them. When the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, the colonial power of the time, began to fight the slave trade at the turn of the twentieth century, southerners were also brought together by the various colonial policies deemed antagonistic to their well-being. Southerners responded to colonialism as people affected by the colonial order in ways that differed from the northerners. The popular perception was that British colonial authorities and northerners had a common goal to suppress the south and do away with the fabric of its core cultures. Religion and race, regardless of the definitions one applied, were central not only to demarcating the lines separating northern and southern identities, but also to reducing the differences among southerners. Such a sense of political unity was necessary in efforts against British colonialism, which was then seen as favoring the Arabs, Sudanese, and Egyptians.<sup>6</sup> A history of victimization remained a very effective force for unity.

At the end of the colonial era in 1956, southerners again found another unifying force: the view held by their political leaders regarding how independence should tackle the many matters of discord between north and south that dated back to the conception of Sudan as a political entity in the nineteenth century. The idea of two countries emerging out of the colony of Sudan had been raised then, since the south had been neglected during the colonial period.<sup>7</sup> Southern leaders felt that the independence of Sudan as one country would mean that the south became yet again a colony—this time of the north, as an Arab power asserted itself over Africans. Thus united, southerners argued collectively for the British to either delay independence until the south was ready to compete with the north on an equal footing, or set up two separate countries. As the British hastily exited Sudan without rectifying their wrongs, however, southerners had to choose between remaining with the north and being second-class citizens in their own country or fighting for a better arrangement that would transform the old exploitative Sudan into a modern state where citizenship implied rights for all. That lived history is one of the experiences that the current population of South Sudan point to as a foundation for their new nation. With Sudan's independence failing to reassure southerners, a protracted and violent conflict raged between north and south for seventeen years. This postcolonial experience united southerners yet again and set them on a collision course with the north. Despite many disagreements among southerners, which were sometimes very violent, the experience of the war, including Khartoum's counterinsurgency tactics against civilians in the south, convinced large swaths of the southern population that the north was a common enemy and that all southerners should set aside their differences and unite.

South Sudan's history of struggle against oppression is one that every learned South Sudanese today understands as being shared by all. It is echoed in the words of Lual Diing, a veteran politician from Aweil, who said that "we suffered together because our enemies saw our various identities as one and the same, and so we should turn that shared painful past into a positive outcome and say that we are indeed one."<sup>8</sup> In the wake of independence, it



is hoped that such messages will be heeded to stem violence among people in the south, now that they are freed from their common oppressor.

The event most closely related to the emergence of what one might describe as a South Sudanese identity—that is, the sentiment that they are one people—was the second round of the north-south war (1983–2005). When the fighting started, southern grievances included a protest against then-President Nimeiri’s application of *sharia*, the redrawing of north-south borders in an attempt to annex some newly discovered oil-rich areas to the north, the question of an oil refinery proposed to be built in Port Sudan instead of in areas of production in the south, and the plan to divide the then-autonomous south into three weaker regions, clearly abrogating the Addis Ababa Agreement that had ended the first civil war. All these shared grievances allowed the south to speak with one voice against Khartoum, and the war that was triggered by these policies and the SPLA/M’s popular support was regarded by people in South Sudan as testament to the south’s unity of purpose. Some southern Sudanese supported Khartoum, but it was unmistakable that the south had taken another step toward unity. Most supporters of the “re-division”<sup>9</sup> of the south came to regret their actions later, when they realized that it was a mechanism northerners supported to weaken the south. They later joined the SPLA en masse. The Khartoum government responded with counterinsurgency tactics that targeted civilians in urban centers, accusing nearly all southerners of supporting the opposition. Collective punishment became the norm, pushing more and more people into rebellion and swelling the ranks of the opposition. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the south witnessed gruesome atrocities involving air bombardment and ground attacks on villages and SPLA-controlled towns. These tactics resulted in displacement and destruction not seen anywhere since World War II. Two and half million people are believed to have died, and most South Sudanese are still convinced that a genocidal campaign was carried out while the world watched. With that came increased negative sentiment toward the north and the south’s greatest determination in the history of the struggle to achieve separation. The treatment of internally displaced persons in the north, the extrajudicial killings in government-controlled garrison towns in the south, and the whole idea that all the country’s political problems and the periphery-center problems should be solved through military might, all cemented southerners’ resolve to stand together, at least until the main goal was achieved.<sup>10</sup> The SPLA/M’s concept of a New Sudan—that is, making all Sudan democratic and secular instead of attempting to secede from it—seductive as it was, began to wane among ordinary fighters. The continued horrific conflict, the abductions, the maiming of abductees, and the aerial bombings all convinced southerners that they could not share a nation with northerners. South Sudanese political humor is currently awash with jokes about John Garang’s vision of New Sudan, how it had always been a geopolitical tactic, how doubtful it is that he genuinely meant what he preached, and how he had frustratingly remarked that “anyone not convinced about the liberation of the whole Sudan can stop when we reach Kosti and leave me to march to Khartoum alone if I so choose.”<sup>11</sup>

History demonstrates the gradual emergence of the ingredients that created South Sudan’s sense of a collective national identity, internally muddled as it may be. These experiences helped form a concept of southernness, the idea that being a South Sudanese was not only a matter of geography, but of cultural, ethnic, and racial connections, juxtaposed against the historical injustices done by colonial powers and the Khartoum government. But is this history enough to be the foundation for a new nation?

## The New South and the Rise of a Nation

South Sudan’s independence carries the question of whether the historical experiences that have long united the old south will endure in the new south, enabling the young country to

become a unified political, cultural, and social entity—in short, a nation. So far, the unity of purpose that kept the south together as a political entity has been, in a sense, a negative unity, driven by opposition to the north. If there is no war between Sudan and South Sudan after separation, there is a chance that the old ethnic discord within the country will rear its ugly head once again. There are already many signs of this, as the relative calm that has prevailed since the 2005 truce between north and south has started to run out of steam, revealed by the many rebellions against the Juba government. These rebellions are rooted in rivalries among top military officers, triggered by perceptions that political power in Juba has been heavily dominated by a few ethnic groups. These episodes quickly take on an ethnic character, as their leaders play the ethnic card to attract fighters into the rebellion. Ethnic relations in the city of Juba have been extremely volatile due to accusations that the Dinka, South Sudan's largest ethnic group, have dominated the government; claims of violence by Nuer and Dinka-dominated army personnel; and suspicions of land grabbing by people who are not indigenous residents of the town. The Bari—the ethnic group more autochthonous to Juba—blame the presence of a large population of SPLA soldiers for the election of Clement Wani, who is from the Mandari ethnic group, as governor of Central Equatoria in the April 2010 elections, implying that the Dinka and Nuer are helping impose an unwanted governor on the Bari.

None of the above bodes well for the future unity of the country. Some Equatorians claim that the presence of the national capital in their town has only led to their marginalization in their own territory. Non-Equatorians are demanding that either the capital be moved to another town if the Equatorians continue their rhetoric or a national land policy be issued to declare the national capital a multiethnic arena that reflects the diversity of the nation. "If we say that Juba is to become a national capital, then we are recognizing the benefits that accrue from it, and we are also agreeing that any citizen of this country has the right to choose the capital as his place of residence. . . . We can't have it both ways, to want the benefits that the capital city provides and to desire to keep out all other citizens," remarked a citizen from Jonglei state in an interview. If the question of land is not politically and constitutionally addressed for the capital city and across the country in general, there will undoubtedly be a major crisis, which could trigger ethnic violence.

## **The Referendum and the Growing National Sentiment**

Most South Sudanese, if not all, are quick to declare their citizenship in the south, and there is no doubt that they would work and fight for it. It is unclear whether they are all speaking about the same south, however, or a different south as envisioned by each ethnic group. When the peace process that ended the war in 2005 was being negotiated, self-determination for the south was the centerpiece of that process. The entire southern population had hung their aspirations for a better future on this right: Most southerners wanted it at any cost, and eventually, it became the single issue on which every southerner was unwilling to compromise. Any political leader who had different opinions about it could only voice them to his or her own detriment. The negotiators, reading the mood of their people, were ready to grant concessions and lose many things in exchange for self-determination. But with the creation of a new state, will South Sudan transform this popular demand for independence into the nation South Sudanese expect? The question is all the more acute due to the challenges that the new nation faces in attempting to address the aspirations of the people, who fought in a long and testing struggle, voted overwhelmingly for independence, and expected an immediate independence dividend. Will independence prove to be the panacea for the problems that have confronted South Sudan for over a half century? Or will the people's expectations be so great as to result in disappointment and make the country ungovernable?

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In the course of research for this paper, the policy frameworks for many of the new government's ministries were reviewed to examine what the Juba government is doing to tackle the difficulties it faces. From what is stated on these policy frameworks and the ministries' constitutional mandates, South Sudan's government envisions the new nation as standing on four pillars needed to hold up the country: political unity, a strong and disciplined military, a strong economy and services delivery, and a vibrant civil society. In interviews with people in many sectors of South Sudanese society, there is clear agreement between government and citizen on this vision. The outstanding question is that of its implementation, as the citizen is expecting the government to uphold its side of the promise and the government is hoping that its actions will inspire citizens to take up their national duties. In short, the pillars of the nation are rather wobbly.

### ***Political Unity***

As stated earlier, South Sudan and the idea of southernness has always been imagined and practiced in opposition to the north. The struggle against the Khartoum government's counterinsurgency practices, the memories of the war atrocities, and the politics of exclusion and marginalization of the peripheries in Sudan's development process all helped to forge both political unity and a sense of collective southern identity. The momentum for the unity of purpose was sped up by the events that followed the signing of the CPA in 2005 that ended the quarter-century civil war. These events include the claims that Khartoum was not forthright regarding wealth sharing, especially the oil proceeds that the south feels cheated out of. They also involve suspicions that Khartoum continued to engage in activities aimed at destabilizing the south, as in the violence it fomented in the contested region of Abyei. But the most important event was the southern referendum on unity or separation, in which southerners demonstrated an unprecedented convergence of purpose and voted in favor of independence. The calmness of the voting period was almost shocking, given the violence that had plagued the country for over thirty years. But the uncharacteristic peace was quickly disrupted by rebellions in seven of the south's ten states—some of which are still raging—with tragic consequences for national unity, human life, and development programs. This has particularly weakened political unity among the top leaders, especially in competition for public office.

Furthermore, there is currently a divide between those who physically fought in the liberation struggle and seem to feel a sense of entitlement to government privileges, and those who have contributed to the struggle in a variety of other ways and now feel excluded because they did not fight. This is natural for a young nation that has seen so much destruction, losing millions of precious lives in the course of two protracted wars. It is also to be expected of a people who have experienced abject poverty due to oppression of one kind or another for over 191 years. The history of exclusion, which is the source of South Sudan's hope for unity, also can provoke competing viewpoints among southerners.<sup>12</sup> These viewpoints, however, should not be allowed to derail the national project.

### ***A Disciplined Military***

South Sudan's current defense force is composed of the SPLA, the rebel movement that liberated the country; various militia forces that had opposed the SPLA during the war but were absorbed into it after the 2005 peace agreement; and a large number of military personnel that were part of the northern Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), but who were also absorbed into the SPLA. This composition has made for a very volatile relationship among the senior command officers. But the SPLA's most significant challenge is corruption. Many soldiers have abandoned the service because they feel their leaders are not serious about their national

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duties. Most senior officers are accused of misappropriating army funds. There is widespread talk about forces at war fronts and those serving far away from Juba who go for months without receiving their salaries because senior officers have drawn from the defense budget for themselves. As the army takes 40 percent of the national budget, people expect better things from the SPLA—not the dilapidated barracks, absence of a true military college, shoddy training (the likes of which was reported by the Small Arms Survey) and poor state of its hardware.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Basic Service Delivery as Independence Dividend***

South Sudan is almost the size of Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Burundi combined, but a quarter century of war has left the country with a legacy of destruction that manifests itself in some of the worst human development indicators in the world. The country needs a road network—currently, it has only forty miles of paved roads—and extension of electricity to all corners, along with a host of other services. The expectations of the country's people are high. Balancing all this against the government's corruption and weak institutional capacity, as well as an annual government budget of \$2 billion, it is easy to see a future of disappointment and instability.

### ***A Vibrant Civil Society***

The government seems convinced that civil society is a partner rather than an adversary in governance. This attitude derives from the days of the war, when South Sudan had an active civil society that mainly chronicled and reported both the atrocities of the Khartoum government and the abuses of their own opposition army, and campaigned for a peaceful solution to Sudan's conflicts. As there was no political power worth fighting over during the war, South Sudan's activist groups had no conflict with the liberation movement, especially because civil society was also involved in delivering services to make up for the state's absence in the lives of most southerners. After the 2005 peace agreement, most of the important civil society leaders joined the newly established South Sudan government. However, there is no parliamentary bill defining the rights and responsibilities of activists, leaving civil society open to government suppression if the sting of criticism becomes too strong. At the moment, there is still something of an environment for civil society to grow, but the experiences of other countries, such as Eritrea, show that the lack of a definite law leaves room for the government to invent laws along the way that hamper independent speech and open criticism. It is very likely that political space will shrink in the future if the government of South Sudan loses confidence in its ability to withstand criticism, and officials might use the absence of a clear law to suppress civil society.

### **Toward a National Cultural Project**

How historical memory shapes ethnic conflict can be forgotten in the immediacy of the moment. Nation building is not just about physical reconstruction, service provision, or material wealth. It is also about using the country's shared customs to prevent further escalation of conflict, as well as upholding values, customs, and traditional practices that can be enshrined in national identity. In other words, a nation is not the sum of its material possessions. Rather, people are the most important assets; they are the nation, and how each citizen behaves becomes the face and reflection of the nation's character. A new nation cannot afford to relax its self-criticism and reflection. The philosophy of developing a good image, as found in policy statements and remarked on by interviewees for this study, suggests that the best way for the nation to hold itself to its own standards is to teach its values to its youngest citizens,

to remind everyone of who they are as a people. The current attitude of openness to criticism will enable the people of South Sudan to be their own best judge and critic.

But if individuals do not reflect the national moral outlook, it will not be long before the nation begins to ignore its own standards; these standards have to be self-imposed. And such morality cannot be instilled in people through laws and constitutions alone; these documents cannot teach people how to avoid violating their rules. Rather, each citizen needs to internalize the national moral standards, through parents, schoolteachers, religious leaders, and above all, exemplary political leaders who uphold teachings of equality and mutual respect. Currently, accusations of corruption, nepotism, and abuse of the justice system and law enforcement are common. A change in government behavior will go a long way in easing citizens' worries for their country.

To join a community of sovereign nations, South Sudan also will need to identify its own homegrown philosophy of development, democracy, and open participatory system of governance. To be strong and respected, it must build itself on the four pillars mentioned above and develop symbols of nationhood around which to rally the public. In addition to creating a national anthem and flag, naming the country, founding a currency, and establishing sports teams, the building of national symbols should include honoring the memory of the struggle and celebrating the country's diverse culture through cultural centers, museums of heritage, and national archives.

### ***Commemorating the Revolution***

South Sudan's struggle has been long and hard, and individuals and communities have competing claims of nationalism. It is commonly believed that South Sudan's fight for independence began in earnest with the Torit mutiny by the southern officer corps in 1955. Despite professional historians' qualms with it, South Sudan has officially marked this as the date when the first north-south war began. To prevent a rift within citizens' ranks, a specific project that some people are calling the South Sudan History and Documentation Project is being developed. This project will record the recent past and history of the struggle as ordinary people witnessed it. It will tone down the unnecessary hierarchy of contributions made by different people, especially any references to which ethnic groups have made the greatest contribution and the conclusion that they must be rewarded for it. This important history has to be recorded, exhibited, celebrated, and taught in schools. It has stamped itself on human bodies and could be commemorated with symbols of these bodies. A war memorial at the bottom of Jebel Kujur or on the face of Jebel Lado, or on the island of Gondokoro, might serve this purpose. The project could also celebrate the heroes and heroines of the liberation struggle through memorials and statues, street names, and war museums to be erected in different states and towns across South Sudan, such as the Dr. John Garang Mausoleum in Juba, which the Ministry of Culture and Heritage has led in developing into a national symbol to show the price that South Sudanese have paid for their freedom. The new country ought to recognize all its struggle leaders, from Any-nya to Any-nya II to the SPLA. There is now a program to erect monuments in honor of such prominent heroes as Samuel Gaitut, Majier Gai, Akuot Atem, Joseph Uduhu, William Nyuon Bany, Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, and General Tafeng, just to mention a few, in public squares of various towns, which will become a source of pride for all citizens. The current government envisions these monuments being done in a way that is unique to how Africans commemorate history, which is more performative than static.

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### ***Cultural Centers***

Many South Sudanese suggest that one factor contributing to conflict in a nation is a lack of a deep collective psyche. The opportunity to become a nation comes partly from

observing a shared history, culture, and identity, all displayed together in cultural centers. To this end, two types of activities are immediately needed. The first involves constructing a national archive to preserve important historical records, research, and teaching about the past. All were shocked when the national government turned a blind eye to the actions of the government of Central Equatoria state in displacing its archive to a tent. That these documents—a collective history, a foundation of the nation—are now being destroyed by exposure to the elements is a shame to the nation. The same goes for the only national cultural center, called Nyakuron, which the government of the autonomous Southern Region built in the 1970s. The government of Central Equatoria state then leased the center to a private party, depriving the nation of an important institution and venue for celebrating its diverse cultural wealth. A nation aspiring to put its cultures on display will have to take this institution back or build a separate, more comprehensive national center, with performing arts and theatrical stages, to enable all South Sudan's ethnic nations to stage their dances and music so that all can appreciate the arts and cultures of others. This is part of what would produce a cohesive nation.

### ***National Museum of Heritage***

A national museum of heritage would celebrate South Sudan's everyday cultural existence, including healing practices and religions; dwellings and architecture; language, music, and dance; marriage and bride wealth; cooking utensils and the types of food indigenous to the country; bedding and headrests; war and weapons; photographs displaying the different faces of ethnic nations; systems of traditional governance; and clothing, trades, and crafts. It might be called the Museum of Ethnography, or simply the National Museum of Culture.

### ***Educating for Unity***

Educational systems can be a major driver of unity in a variety of ways, and the government has a plan to "take education to the villages," as stated by the ministry of education. The more literacy spreads, the more likely people will adopt common cultural practices and leave aside other practices that have outlived their usefulness, such as the scarification of the forehead and removal of lower teeth commonly practiced among the Nilotics. When children attend school, literacy becomes an attack on some of these customs. Furthermore, when students get to high school, a long-term program of national integration begins. In the 1960s and 1970s, there used to be a program of national boarding high schools where children from across the country could study and learn about the diverse cultures of Sudan and thus develop appreciation for difference. Graduates from such schools then attended national universities, further interacting with even greater numbers of people from other ethnic nationalities and returning to their home areas with a national perspective. Such boarding high schools could be revived in the new South Sudan.

## **Conclusion**

Many factors work against a project to develop a national identity in South Sudan. An endeavor to create one depends on the commitment of the entire government. Ideas about possible external funding sources for such a project need to be fine tuned, based on national priorities that South Sudanese set according to a homegrown philosophy of development, rather than the usual development policies that donors dictate. Such policies, if they address the priorities of the nation, have to be generated from the input and advice of experts across the whole of South Sudanese society. With such an approach, South Sudan could embark right away on the mission of involving every citizen in the business of participa-

tory governance. The Ministry of Culture and Heritage has already kicked off this effort by creating a policy framework that envisions a collective effort with other branches of the government, independent artists, and cultural communities to set a policy for constructing the nation's identity.

With the conviction that all nations are made, not born, South Sudanese expect their government to lead the way in forging national symbols and a program of national unity. Before becoming unified, stable, and developed, all nations as we know them today had to go through prolonged periods of struggle to forge their sense of collective existence. Coexistence in South Sudan is not just a nice thing to say or a rhetoric of political correctness. It is a matter of the survival of the whole. No one gains from exclusionary practices or from citizenship in and primary loyalty to each one's own specific cultural groups. All can gain from promoting an inclusive sense of national belonging, rallying around national symbols, practicing citizen-centered national policies, and building a citizenry devoted to the concept of citizenship in the nation.

## Notes

1. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "Negotiating Sudan's North-South Future," CSIS, Washington, DC, 2010. A host of other think tanks from the United States, Europe, and Africa, as well as many publications, including *The Economist* and *The New York Times*, have all pointed to the possibilities of a rough future for the young country.
2. "Sudan's Split: A Northern Attack on a Disputed Town Complicates Southern Independence," *The Economist*, May 26, 2011, and "The Birth of South Sudan: Managing Expectations," *The Economist*, July 8, 2011.
3. One of the events commonly considered to be South Sudan's earliest collective effort regarding its future is the 1947 Juba Conference, in which the few southern intellectuals of that time and tribal chiefs had gathered to demand that South Sudan was different from the north and that the British must create two separate countries at the time of independence. It is one of the few historical actions by southerners for which written records can be found.
4. The Dinka comprise 35 percent of South Sudan's population, followed by the Nuer, and the two are often accused of monopolizing political and military power. Ethnic groups in Greater Equatoria often complain that the Dinka are running an exclusionary government.
5. From interviews with the author.
6. The perception in South Sudan at the moment is that the British were the root cause of Sudan's political ills, in that they forced together parts of the country that could never become one nation. Most learned South Sudanese believe that the British could have easily pulled the north and south out of the quagmire regarding the contested border.
7. See Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003); Jok Madut Jok, *Sudan: Race, Religion and Violence* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2007).
8. Lual Diing was a member of the SPLA's military command council when he made this remark at a political rally in Wanjok, a town in Aweil East County on June 18, 2002.
9. *Re-division* was the term used to refer to the policies of Nimeiri, then dictator of Sudan, to divide the southern region into three weaker provinces, in contravention of the Addis Ababa Accord, which had given Southern Sudan an autonomous status as a unified block. This division was demanded by some Equatorian leaders in registering their complaint against what they termed Dinka domination of the government.
10. Heart-wrenching stories of abduction, rape, disappearance, and murder of men, women, and young girls abound in Juba. These actions, carried out by Khartoum's army in the South's garrison towns, are being told and retold and are part of Southerners' quest for independence from the north and unity of the south.
11. As reported to the author by ex-combatants who heard Garang speak.
12. For further details on the history and politics of liberation, see Peter Adwak Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's Viewpoint* (Kampala: Fountain Press, 2001).
13. Richard Rands, "In Need of Review: SPLA Transformation in 2006-10 and Beyond," Small Arms Survey, Geneva, 2010.

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