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Sudan's separation

Their day in the sun

JUBA AND TORIT

South Sudanese are gaining independence on July 9th but have yet to build a fully functioning state

THE South Sudanese minister of information, Barnaba Marial, wells up at the thought of independence for his nation. It is bigger than his wedding day, he says; the biggest day of his life. For Mr Marial, and for most of his countrymen, the journey of two wars, 2m dead, starting with an uprising in the town of Torit in 1955, is a biblical march of a chosen people out of the steppe, swamps and hills of the lower reaches of the Nile.

The part of Moses was for a long time played by John Garang, the founder of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army and its political wing, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLA/SPLM). Garang died in a helicopter crash in 2005 after securing a peace deal with the rulers in Sudan's north. His successor, Salva Kiir, like Garang from the majority Dinka people, is a lesser prophet.

Free at last, free at last. Even out in the bush the celebratory mood is infectious and moving. Almost everyone, from generals to cattle herders has been learning the new national anthem. The first verse goes, "Land of great abundance, uphold us united in peace and liberty".

No one doubts the abundance. South Sudan has fertile and well-watered lands, with an estimated 8m to 14m people (nobody really knows) compared with 84m in neighbouring Ethiopia. Villagers in South Sudan need not buy farmland. They simply walk into the scrub and cultivate it. The price of a smallholding of several hectares

is only the minimal sum needed to have it marked out and registered.

South Sudan has the potential to be among the largest food producers in Africa. The country also has hardwood timber. It has oil, gold, chromium, iron ore and a host of other minerals. Some reckon oil revenues will fall off before 2020. Others are more hopeful. The government wants to divide up unused concessions owned by Total, a French company, and sell them to other enterprises.

But the combination of abundance and weak government almost never has a happy outcome in Africa. The new government can draw on very few trained officials. Ministries lack computers. Tax collectors are illiterate.

The new country could break down in civil conflict along the unsettled northern border or within itself. A recent agreement between north and south to put 4,200 Ethiopian peacekeepers in the disputed region of Abyei may hold. Neither side wants a return to war. Even so, the UN says 2,000 people have been killed and 300,000 displaced in fighting so far this year. The north is mostly to blame, particularly in the Kordofan region. But there have also been cases of South Sudan hammering militias that dared to defy it. That reflects squabbling over local resources, lack of communications in a country with few roads and indiscipline in ragtag bits of the army.

There is also the dogmatism of the SPLM. As with most African liberation

movements, history has only one telling. The guerrillas are intolerant of criticism and angry at journalists. Yet a state built solely on the SPLM'S narrative is bound to disappoint. The vice-president of the new country, Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer, has already been sidelined. He is distrusted by some of the Dinka higher-ups.

If South Sudan is to hold together and prosper, it has to overcome many hurdles. The first is transport. The republic is a quagmire for several months a year. Rains swamp what few roads there are. Some progress has been made in building gravel tracks. It is possible to drive between some of the federal states even during the rainy season. But transport remains expensive and settlements themselves are often sunk in mud. New ideas and technologies are needed (see box on next page).

A second challenge is "monetising" the country's livestock and moving the Dinka and Nuer cultures on from cow worship. The government says the country has 12m cattle and 24m goats and sheep. Yet there is no meat-export industry and little interest among herders in selling their animals.

A further task is to push development and investment beyond Juba, the pleasant town on the Nile chosen as the capital that is dominated by Dinkas. The governor of the state of Eastern Equatoria, Louis Lobo Lojore, says his people want more federalism. That means, for example, giving states the right to strike deals with foreign investors. Ministers in Juba rudely dismiss such ambitions. Investment has to come through the capital and the terms must be decided by officials there.

A question keeps cropping up: is South Sudan a nation of equals or a Dinka state? Unless there is a balance between Juba and state capitals and between Dinkas and other groups, South Sudan may prove too big and diverse-too Yugoslav, in other words-to hold together. •