

Birth of a Nation

Caelainn Hogan

At midnight on the eve of independence, the birth of the Republic of South Sudan was heralded with an outburst of celebrations. In Juba, the capital city, people ran through the streets singing and ululating, in the delirium of a moment they never thought would come to be. In a local church the congregation sang happy birthday to the new nation. The next day at the official declaration ceremony thousands gathered to witness the new flag raised high and to sing the national anthem together. Many broke down in tears, thinking of loved ones who had fought or struggled and never got to see this day. The declaration brought an end to a long history of conflict; one that many believed could now be relegated to the past. Others still found inspiration and strength in the past, singing the old revolutionary song, "We will never surrender".

For the people who had been forced to flee their country due to the Sudanese conflict and had now returned, independence was the ultimate homecoming, a new sense of belonging. Grace Amin, a resident of Gudele who had returned in 2003 after living in the North for 21 years, said, "War is over, it's all finished, the land is demarcated". She said that now the country has its independence, "Nobody will oppress us, or force them to do anything."

For others, the joy of independence was overshadowed by loss. The longest running civil war in Africa took an estimated two million lives. "It has cost too much", a woman at the independence ceremony confided, having lost most of her family in the struggle, "It is good we have independence now, but this day cost too much."

Richard, a young medical student who also returned from the North last year, was not so confident. He worried about when the university would re-open so he could finish his degree.

A poster by the clock tower in Juba read, "Independence means work, work and more work." For a university lecturer, independence meant a new and urgent responsibility. "We can no longer blame Bashir, no longer blame the North, now it is only us." Finally, the people are in control of their own future, but also must face up to their challenges alone.

"I am now a human being," said John, a Juba local, "I never knew this before, but now I know I am a human being." The people of South Sudan felt they were now, finally, "first class citizens" in their own country. For the first time they feel empowered enough as citizens to hold their own government accountable and demand changes they feel they need.

It is a difficult position, hearing what high expectations people here have for their country, and at the same time, fully aware of the plethora of challenges the fledgling nation faces. Some people I spoke to, felt disillusioned, knowing a momentous change had taken place, but also feeling a sense of despair as they knew the mundane routine of everyday life grinds on. For some, tangible change is difficult to ascertain beyond the pomp and ceremony.

Many people during the celebrations wore t-shirts declaring, "Today the republic of South Sudan, tomorrow the republic of Somaliland." The exiled President of Western Sahara and

Secretary General of the Polisario Front, Mr Mohamed Abdelaziz, attended the independence celebrations, expressing hope for a similar success for his people. However, independence for South Sudan will make no concrete change for its people if the country ends up a failed state, as some have predicted.

As an Irish citizen, knowing the challenges to autonomy and independence posed to Ireland by the recent IMF bailout, it seems particularly urgent for the government of South Sudan to address its dependence on international support. How can a country which relies on NGO's for 80% of its basic services be truly autonomous?

The people this writer met here have high expectations for the success of their new nation and they understand there is much work to be done. However, many are still looking to NGO's and the UN to improve their conditions, rather than making demands of the government. In a programme aired on the eve of independence, school children were asked what changes they wanted to see in the new nation. They asked for things as basic as toilets, hospitals and electricity. Many have a generous, patient attitude towards the new government, saying it needs time, that it is a "new born", but these are the most rudimentary services one should be able to expect from its government. Transition will take time, but the culture of dependence is first thing that must change.

In the Birth of a Nation booklet handed out during the Independence ceremony, there was a quote of the late Dr John Garang, iconic founder of the Sudan People's Liberation Army and Movement (SPLAM). Garang said the people who fought in the bush and the SPLA, handed the people the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on 'a golden platter'. However, South Sudan won its independence ultimately through a peaceful and democratic referendum of January 2011, when 98.8% of people voted for secession. While people watching the official speeches on Independence Day shouted their thanks to President Salva Kiir, who was introduced as "liberator and gift to the people", they actually did not see independence as a result of their own determination. The government of the new Republic of South Sudan declared they are dedicated to a decentralised, democratic process, but for democracy to succeed the people must have faith in their own voice and know when to use it.

If the people are to take inspiration from the words of Garang, it should be from his opinion that "self-determination is not something that can be given to you, you have to own it." The relevance of these words has never been more crucial or more urgent. The people of South Sudan have certainly earned their independence, but to truly own it, to ensure its success, is now their ultimate responsibility. The birth of the nation is only the beginning. ☺☺☺

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[Caelainn Hogan, an Irish journalist who was in Juba for South Sudan's Independence day, 9 July, 2011]