

FEDERALISM OR TRIBALISM?

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I am taken aback that we have a disaster in our country arising from the rebellion last December by the ex Vice President and others against the elected President and Government of South Sudan.

A great number of our citizens have been adversely affected by the clashes in Greater Upper Nile, in Malakal, Bor, Bentiu and other areas in our country. Many people are still unable to come out from IDP camps or have left the country. It is a tragedy for many families, including those Nuers and Dinka killed in Juba, some Nuer and Dinka SPLA men who decided to fight against their Government and the young members of the White Army who were led to their death, and the faithful of our SPLA who died on the line of duty, and so many who have been injured. All of these people are South Sudanese, and they are a great loss to our country regardless of their ethnicity or political persuasion.

We are all mourning what has happened and are trying to figure out how we can heal the wounds and bring our people together again. Government, civil society, the youth, women groups and the churches are working hard to empower the reconciliation initiative which is taking place.

While Dr Riek is trying to confuse the country by convincing some people from Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal and Equatoria that the only way out of the aftermath of his actions is to divide us into 21 states leaving him in charge of oil fields proves a truly short-sighted and devious approach. It is sad to hear some voices from Equatoria and Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal region supporting Dr Riek that taking power by force to impose federalism is the only way forward as if what happened in December 2013 was of no concern to him. Dr Riek must first acknowledge and take full responsibility for violating the constitution and provoking a tribal war before talking about the best way to organise the country.

To Dr Riek and these people I must say we fought together the war of liberation in 1955 and again in 1982 until we obtained our independence. In this struggle we stood as one tribe, not 64. Not as Greater Upper Nile, Greater Bahr-el-Ghazal or Greater Equatoria, but as what has become the Republic of South Sudan, one people, one tribe and one Nation. We must remember that we gained our independence in spite of our difficulties by standing together against the enemy who has tried to divide us in 1991, using the same Dr Riek Machar and others like him.

I question the argument that now is the time for federalism. I am not against federalism in principle, and indeed the President has repeatedly said the same thing. The people of the South spoke of federalism during the struggle with the North. As soon as we gained our independence we moved towards decentralisation with the division of the country into 10 states. In the longer term this process can and should lead us to federalism if that is the will of our people.

However, to have a federal system like those of a number of western countries we need a secure foundation on which to build; and that foundation needs to be a sense of nationhood among our 64 tribes. We have to come together to acknowledge and respect our diverse and rich ethnic culture. We need to learn from each ethnic group and celebrate the diversity of our languages. We can do

this. I know that there are so many cultural practices that we share. Even in our diverse tribal languages there are words used in the different parts of the Republic that are similar and convey the same thoughts, heritage and background.

I would like to understand why Dr Riek and some people are calling for federalism now. Are they arguing for federalism or for tribalism? I fear that they think that federalism on the lines of ethnicity or tribal grouping would be a good solution to our current problems.

Perhaps some people think that with a federal system they could isolate themselves from the difficulties that other areas are currently facing. The more peaceful areas of South Sudan might feel that they would be able to avoid the conflicts between tribes of the sort that has erupted between some Nuer and some Dinka. They might believe that, if they could create a unit of government with boundaries that included just a single tribe, it would bring peace for them.

In my view it would be a mistake to try to create a system of federal states on the lines of tribal boundaries. We know that in practice tribal areas overlap: you cannot have a federal state for Bantus without including Nilotics who live in the same area or one for Nilotics without including Bantus. Indeed intermarriage is increasingly common between couples of different tribal background. So the search for state boundaries which tidily reflect a single ethnicity will not produce a satisfactory result. Whatever boundaries are drawn there will always be a majority tribe and one or more minority tribes within them. There will always be the need for different tribes to work together for good government, however small the area chosen is.

In addition we must remember that there are intertribal loyalties; these will always mean that people in one state would want to support those in another if they feel a minority is not being treated well. We must recognise that in too many cases there have been irresponsible comments made by one tribe against another, implying that one tribe is inferior to another. That can lead the tribe which feels attacked to react with force. We know that tragically some people will go out hunting for the other tribe, because one of their numbers was singled out for attack. This is not the way that a modern country can work.

A second argument that Dr Riek and some people make for federalism is that it could give them power over the natural resources under the land they want. Some areas have the country's oil reserves, others have mineral resources, and indeed some have potential tourist attractions in the form of wildlife. But the country's natural assets belong to the whole country, ie the Republic, in other words, the land called South Sudan belongs to the Republic of South Sudan. We have seen disputes over the land in Juba; sadly some people feel that all lands in central Equatoria belong to them and not to the Republic, forgetting that every tribe in our country has lost someone to free every inch of land in our country.

A third argument made for a federal system might be the belief that as a group they would be able to organise themselves better than other tribal groups. Fed up with the difficulties of the organisation, and management that they see at present in the country, they might feel that they would be better off on their own. There is much talk of corruption and mismanagement in the Republic, which can lead people to despair of the current system. Added to the hardship caused by the loss of oil revenues which is very immediate this can lead people to demand change. But they need to look ahead and analyse properly the implications of the alternative they are proposing.

Those wanting a better managed government should remember that there is the risk that many new states and boundaries would increase the fragmentation of government processes, reducing the efficiency of administration. We need more efficient administration, not less.

Who can be clear what in practice federalism would provide? The concept is very broad and can mean many different things. Suppose that a division of the country into federal states was attempted. What form of federalism could be agreed by the Parliament of the Republic? Decisions would be needed on the rights of the Republic against the rights of the states, as well as delineation of every boundary. Would this be a smooth process while there remained enmity, suspicion and tension between tribes of the Republic? Or might a divisive attempt as proposed by Dr Riek and others to carve up the country be more likely to lead to civil war?

We should ask some hard questions. What foundation have we created to take forward the Republic of South Sudan? What are the strategies to be put in place that will help us narrow the cultural gap between our diverse tribes? What do we mean by nation building? Do we mean building infrastructure or do we mean building up our people to recognise and respect each other? I'm sorry to say that some of our current politicians don't see that far into the future, and have no clear vision or strategic thinking into how a nation is created.

I firmly believe that we are not yet ready for a federal system. The answer to our tribal problem is for all citizens in South Sudan to come together in reconciliation, in order to accept and celebrate the diversity of our tribal backgrounds. If one side of a hut you share with your brother and sister caught a fire, you can't sit inside the same hut thinking the fire wouldn't reach you. You are safer fighting the fire together. And if you think the best solution is to run away and build yourself a new hut leaving your brothers and sisters in problems, be sure they will follow you into your new hut. So it is better to build the new hut together and to continue to live and work together for a better future for our Nation, our united hut.

In my opinion, the right thing to do now while thinking and talking about the best federal system for our country, is to accept that something has badly gone wrong and put a 7 - 10 years programme of work to do the following: stop fighting, bring our people closer together by stopping tribalism, forgive each other, bring peace to our country by putting the wrong we have done right, work hard to bring basic services to our people, empower both agriculture and animal farming, create jobs, link our ten states with road, rail and air network, prepare our young through a new education initiative to build on this foundation of our true unity in the years to come. God bless South Sudan and her people, and bring her peace.

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