

Democracy Is a Fragile Thing

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President Salva Kiir Mayardit's attendance at the UN General Assembly next week will carry a strong message – the support of the international community for the people of South Sudan in their quest for self-determination was the right thing to do. The United States government and the American people celebrated the birth of this young, democratic nation after a long and difficult struggle to achieve national dignity and a voice in the running of their own affairs. But we supported that struggle because we believed in the people of South Sudan and their fervent desire to live under democratic institutions and to uphold a high standard of human rights for all of its citizens.

Democracy is hard earned, but easily lost. It is easy to become impatient with the pace of change and imperfect democratic processes, and want to force that change along by undemocratic means. Such a path will not only crush the dreams of a young nation, but it will also lose the support of the United States, one of the strongest partners and supporters of South Sudan and its people.

Straying from the path of democracy will dash the hopes and dreams of a people who have sacrificed far beyond the comprehension of those who have never personally experienced war, or been marginalized in their own homeland. The road traveled by those seeking emancipation can span decades, leaving the soles of countless feet and shoes cracked and worn. Yet, with bloodied feet and unbroken pride, believers march on because they know that their sacrifices will not be in vain.

Ballots cast in January 2011 for the people of South Sudan to determine whether they wanted to remain part of the Sudan or vote to secede started a chain of events that led to independence and the opportunity for the people of south Sudan to build a new nation. At independence just over one year ago, South Sudan faced the daunting task of creating institutions to support and grow its nascent democracy. However, South Sudan was not left to stand alone. The determination of the southern Sudanese people inspired many nations and countless individuals the world over to lend a helping hand.

Across the Atlantic, religious and civic leaders, politicians, activists, and numerous concerned citizens continued to provide moral and financial support, and cemented relationships with their South Sudanese friends. Excited discussions filled the corridors of U.S. government buildings with talks on how best to assist South Sudan's development. The U.S. Government was determined that foreign assistance target sectors critical to South Sudan's overall prosperity and stability. Totalling over \$1 billion, U.S. foreign assistance from 2011 to 2013 focuses on good governance, agriculture, economic development, education, the environment, conflict mitigation and reconciliation, health, rule of law, human rights, security sector reform, and civil society development.

The U.S. government's assistance to South Sudan is not a gift - it is an investment in the world's youngest country and newest democracy's success following decades of strife. Looking toward the near future, we see a stable, prosperous and democratic South Sudan as a key partner for the United States in this part of the world. We see that partnership as based on shared values of tolerance, representative governance and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. As long as South Sudan remains committed to these values, the United States will continue to stand by you.

Our dedication, however, is a commitment to citizen participation and political plurality, equality and tolerance, accountability and transparency, free and fair elections, economic freedom and opportunity, human rights protection and enforcement of the rule of law. A blatant disregard of democratic principles could not only result in the immediate loss of U.S. foreign assistance, but it could also set back all the progress made since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on January 9, 2005.

Some will grow impatient because they want to experience the material benefits of democracy now, while others will seek to derail South Sudan's democratic system while it is most fragile for selfish reasons of personal ambition. However, the one who keeps his or her eyes set on the goal of a strong, unified nation will ultimately prosper, even if the fruits of that toil are ultimately enjoyed by future generations.

Patience must partner with wisdom. Decisions must be made by those who look to the future, reflect on the past, and respond appropriately to the present, always with the well-being of future generations of South Sudanese in their hearts and minds. You are citizens of the world's newest nation. The clay of South Sudanese democracy is in your hands. It is yours to mold into the ideal you want for your children, grandchildren, and future generations.

The democratic process is seldom smooth and easy. It is often messy, even in the United States and other countries with long democratic experience. But it does work and it works best over the long term. It has proven itself many times over to be the best vehicle for self-governance and economic growth, the best way to nurture diversity and human rights in a country, the best way to ensure that all voices are heard in society. There are no shortcuts. The United States believes in the people and institutions of South Sudan and we stand by you now just as we have stood by you for so many years. Beware those who would risk that friendship by abandoning the democratic dream for which so many struggled and gave their lives.