

Can Kiir Cut It as President of New State?

Author: [Michael Klimes](#)

Many ex-African rebel leaders have failed as statesmen - but the South Sudan leader may buck the trend.

Experts say that Salva Kiir Mayardit, the South Sudan president, is an inclusive and unifying figure, who is well-placed to make the difficult transition from rebel fighter to statesman.

Last week's referendum on secession, part of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA, which ended the civil war between the mainly Muslim north and Christian or animist south, is likely to see Kiir at the helm of a newly independent state in July.

Kiir has been in charge of the south since the death of his charismatic predecessor, John Garang, in August 2005. Although Kiir's exact age is not known, he is believed to be in his late fifties. A member of the Dinka, South Sudan's largest tribe, he was born in Bhar al-Ghazal, a region in the west of the country.

In the late 1960s, Kiir joined the Anya Nya movement, which started a rebellion in the south in 1962. In 1972, the then Sudanese president Jaafar Numeiri and the movement signed the Addis Ababa agreement under which the south became a self-governing region. Kiir subsequently joined the Sudanese army.

In 1983, another rebellion flared up in the south and Sudan plunged back into civil war. Garang, then a senior officer in the armed forces, was sent by the Khartoum government to put down the revolt but sided with the rebels, founding the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement, SPLM, with Kiir that same year.

Kiir became the SPLM's chief military strategist and gained a formidable reputation as a commander.

"His strengths are he has an extremely strong personality, is experienced and is clever," said Martin Plaut, the BBC World Service's Africa editor. "But there is a huge difference between the way you run a rebel movement and the way you ran a country.

"There have been countless African rebels who have undergone the same transition and failed. When you are a rebel leader and people don't obey you, you shoot them. If you are a statesman, you cannot do that."

But Stephen Chan, professor of international relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies, said that despite Kiir's background as "an outstanding military figure", he has a number of advantages over other former rebels who have struggled to make the journey from fighter to political leader.

"There's been an interim period where he's been president," Chan continued. "He has been both president of South Sudan and vice-president of Sudan. Some of the difficulties of making government and the influence of politics in the north must have rubbed off on him. He has not just charged straight from the battlefield to the frontline."

Kiir is also known to be a good listener and a consensus politician. "He has always been prepared to be advised and consultative," Chan said. And he has already made efforts to bring critics and opponents of the SPLM into government, notes Christopher Kidner, programme director at the Rift Valley Institute. "He has made great efforts to keep a united country. I think he will continue along similar lines," he said.

Fouad Hikmat, International Crisis Group special adviser on the African Union and Sudan, regards the relationship between Kiir and Riek Machar, the vice-president of South Sudan, who belongs to Nuer, the second largest ethnic group in the region, as key to ensuring the south remains stable.

"At the moment I think the relationship is going well. Both of them recognise the importance of each other," Hikmat said. "Machar is powerful and he is not shy of taking a decision. He has a large constituency with the Nuer who are highly militarised and whose tribal areas have most of the oil in the south. Kiir needs to keep them in the garden."

The difficulty of keeping South Sudan's tribes together has been evident in the past. In 1991, Machar decided to split from the Sudan People's Liberation Army and form his own rebel faction. Part of this split was ideological - Machar has always been a secessionist, while Garang wasn't - but it was also about gaining greater influence for the Nuer.

Observers say that this split caused the southern rebel movement great harm during the Nineties. Now that South Sudan is heading for independence, the ability of the Sudanese leadership to keep the tribes together will be tested again.

Inevitably, Kiir is compared to the hugely charismatic Garang, but there are clear differences between the

two. Unlike Kiir, Garang was seen as autocratic and brutal. And there were ideological distinctions too. Garang was always ambivalent about independence for South Sudan, while Kiir became convinced that it was the best option.

Recalling Garang's death, Gillian Lusk, who is an associate editor of Africa Confidential and has reported from Sudan for over 30 year, said, "I bumped into a southerner who is now a [member of parliament]. He told me that everybody was crying when Garang died but that it may be a blessing in disguise as they have to move away from one-man rule."

Garang, she continued, may have been intellectually brilliant and a compelling figure but "was ruthless and not a democrat".

His vision, she went on, was also markedly different from that of Kiir, "Garang wanted this new united Sudan. Not many in the south supported it but then everybody was fighting for the south. Their priority was to fight first and sort out the details later."

As well as uniting South Sudan's diverse tribal and ethnic groups, Kiir will face more immediate challenges, such as the task of state-building itself. "The greatest challenges I see for the country are in its infrastructure," Chan said, pointing to particular problems such as the development of telecommunications. "To build those things, you need a lot of security."

And there is the sensitive issue of negotiating the new state's relationship with Khartoum.

"The main challenges for the leadership are discussions on post-referendum issues such as oil, borders, identity, security and political and economic government," Hikmat said. "These talks must be done in such a way that they do not diminish the rights of southerners but also do not weaken the north. The inter-dependency is very high."

But, added Hikmat, Kiir "likes inclusiveness - and is the right man to build a consensus".

Michael Klimes is IWPR intern in London.

Location: Sudan

Topic: Diplomacy

Focus: ICC - International Criminal Court

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/can-kiir-cut-it-president-new-state>