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A Death in Sudan

John Garang became Sudan's first vice president three weeks ago, on July 9. More than a million Sudanese showed up to salute him when he joined his old enemy, President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir, to sign a new constitution. Mr. Garang's ascendance, along with the peace deal it brought, was hailed as a rare success story in Africa, one that could mark the end of more than two decades of war. There was also hope that the unity government between the largely Christian and animist south and the Muslim north might eventually be able to extend the newly cobbled-together peace between the north and south to the western territory, which includes Darfur.

It is tragic that these hopes have already been dashed. The death of Mr. Garang over the weekend in a helicopter crash spawned some of the worst rioting in Khartoum in years, prompting the government to announce a dusk-to-dawn curfew. The situation is frustrating for Sudan's neighbors in the region, which recently helped negotiate the end to the conflict, Africa's longest civil war. It is heartbreaking for the Sudanese people, particularly in the south, Mr. Garang's region, who believed that an end to their years of turmoil was at hand.

It really doesn't have to be like this. Mr. Garang's death doesn't have to tear the peace deal asunder. To salvage the situation, Mr. Garang's party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, needs to choose a worthy successor. Mr. Garang's widow, Rebecca, has thrown in her lot with the party's deputy leader, Salva Kiir. Mr. Kiir lacks Mr. Garang's charisma but it's time for the Sudanese - and indeed, for Africans as a whole - to stop pinning their hopes on magnetic strongmen, and instead empower the democratic institutions the continent desperately needs. That would be a fitting tribute for Mr. Garang, a rebel leader who spent his life giving a voice to the millions in southern Sudan who couldn't make themselves heard.