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South Sudan's Transition: Citizens' Perception of Peace

A power-sharing government set up last month is fueling hope for an end to civil war, but layers of conflict remain.

Thursday, March 19, 2020 / BY: Jan Pospisil; Oringa Christopher; Sophia Dawkins; David Deng

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Last month's breakthrough between South Sudan's government and its armed opposition on establishing a new transitional government represents a critical step toward ending the country's civil war, a conflict that over the past six years has killed more than 400,000 people and displaced a third of the nation's population of 12 million.



Revelers sing and dance as they celebrate their nation's independence in Juba, South Sudan, July 9, 2011. (Tyler Hicks/The New York Times)

The power-sharing deal was implemented under the “Revitalized Agreement on Resolving the Conflict in South Sudan” (R-ARCSS), a [peace accord signed in September 2018](#) that sets out some lofty goals for the new transitional government: Over a two-year period, the government of national unity is to stabilize the situation; open the way for humanitarian assistance; return and resettle displaced populations; implement a sweeping reform agenda; and prepare the country for elections and the subsequent normalization of politics.

But easing the top-level conflict—symbolized by the signature “handshake” moment between President Salva Kiir and the leader of the biggest opposition party, Riek Machar—by no means addresses the totality of conflict dynamics at work in South Sudan.

Armed conflict tends to proliferate and diversify far beyond the [fault lines apparent in national politics](#). In South Sudan, disputes among elites at the national level have obscured more localized violence, whose causes include perceived marginalization,

intercommunal grievances, competition over resources, endemic cattle-raiding and conflict between cattle-keepers and farmers. In a [January 2020 report](#), the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan noted that “armed conflict at the national level mostly transformed into localized conflicts at the beginning of December 2018.” From February to May 2019, civilian casualties in such conflicts jumped 192 percent from a year earlier, according to the report.

Without a nuanced view of how subnational conflicts relate to the broader one, the transitional government and its international partners won't understand the conflict management initiatives and deal-making needed to create stability.

Critical to developing such an understanding is learning how the citizens of South Sudan perceive the peace process and the politics of the transitional period, and how they experience peace, conflict and political change in their daily lives.

Public Perceptions

Little is known about public attitudes toward peace processes in South Sudan. To help fill that void, the United States Institute of Peace funded a research project, [“Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan,”](#) to explore public opinion and draw policy lessons for decisionmakers. The project incorporates the methodology of the [“Everyday Peace Indicator”](#) initiative, which works with communities on the ground to develop and monitor indicators of peace most relevant to people's daily lives.

In the first stage of the research, the project team conducted interviews and focus groups in five locations across South Sudan to inform the development of a large-scale survey slated for the coming months. The cities and towns included in the first stage—Juba, Bentiu, Pibor, Wau and Yei—were selected for their political leanings between government and opposition; their ethnopolitical composition; the existence of subnational peacemaking initiatives; and their links with national politics. Researchers spoke to more than 120 South Sudanese from all walks of life in the five locations.

While supporting development of the wider study, the preliminary research also provided insights that merit consideration in their own right.

Respondents in all five locations equate peace, first and foremost, with their immediate security situation. When asked what they see as the key signs of peace, most of those interviewed identified freedom of movement—whether within town, between towns, or between towns and the countryside.

The security situation has, in fact, improved significantly since the R-ARCSS was signed. At the moment, movement within towns is relatively safe throughout much of South Sudan. While many rural areas remain volatile due to prevalent cattle-raiding, revenge killing and banditry, there is widely acknowledged progress since the 2018 peace agreement. Other indicators of a better situation include fewer gunshots at night, increased quantity and range of goods in markets, the free movement of combatants without triggering infighting, and steps toward renewal of cultural life.

Citizens directly attribute these advances to “handshake moments” between President Kiir and opposition leader Machar. South Sudan’s communication infrastructure is extremely limited, and news that Kiir and Machar appeared to be resolving their differences trickled down to the local level mainly through word of mouth. That was an important signal that the time had come to halt localized armed conflict.

Interviews and focus groups also reinforced the necessity of local conflict-management initiatives more generally. Local politicians such as state governors, alongside [church leaders](#) and civil society, are often perceived to play a critical role in managing such subnational conflicts.

Political opinions and the perceived relevance of political issues differ considerably across communities. For example, federalism and devolved government was an issue of major concern in Bentiu and its sister town of Rubkona, home to more than 120,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the largest United Nations-administered civilian-protection camp in the country. The unease stemmed from a presidential decree breaking South Sudan into 32 states, up from the previous 10. The move was unacceptable to the armed opposition and widely seen as promoting ethnopolitical control of the country and its regions. When asked about the conditions they attach to returning to their home locations, [IDPs](#) pointed to the resolution of the states issue as a necessary (though not sufficient) step.

Many respondents in Wau state expressed a similar sentiment. Resolution of the dispute proved to be a turning point in formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU): In February, the government made a last-minute decision to rescind the states decree and revert to 10 states and three “administrative areas.” Despite the positive tone set by the agreement among the parties on the number of states, IDPs remain uncertain about the path ahead, and most are waiting to see whether the trend toward political stabilization continues before they consider returning home.

In the towns of Pibor and Yei, by contrast, people pointed to ongoing violence in the surrounding areas as a major issue. In Yei, they emphasized the importance of bringing into the transitional government armed groups that didn’t sign the R-ARCSS. Inter-communal cattle-raiding was identified as a serious concern in Pibor, Wau and Bentiu. In interviews, experts and civil society leaders explained that national politics is intertwined with local politics in these locations. At times, politicians can provoke inter-communal violence or use it as an excuse to pursue their interests at the national level. Furthermore, some of those interviewed warned that cattle-raiding and inter-communal conflict cannot be easily contained by awareness and disarmament campaigns.

Respondents were deeply skeptical about the capacity of either government forces or the [United Nations Mission in South Sudan \(UNMISS\)](#) to provide protection and policing that would make disarmament possible. Enduring conflict-management initiatives remain the only option for the foreseeable future.

Roots of Peace

The protracted nature of South Sudan’s civil war is commonly explained as the result of the country’s political leaders refusing to forge a lasting peace accord, mostly out of selfish interests and [mutual mistrust](#). Our findings suggest that a clear signal of leaders’ willingness to come together is key to getting South Sudanese to believe in even the possibility of sustainable peace. This explains why the R-ARCSS in September 2018 heralded a cease-fire, and why respondents in this research felt that the visible unity of leaders in Juba in forming the power-sharing government was necessary for the peace agreement to hold.

Unfortunately, though, South Sudan is host to a multitude of highly localized conflicts where forces amalgamate, align and fall out with each other in what is interpreted as a single civil war. Political leaders—engaged though they may be at local, state or national levels—cannot simply decide on war and peace: They are players in a parallel process of conflict management. International guarantors of peace in South Sudan must take this complexity into account in how they decide to support the new government, conduct diplomacy and design stabilization and development projects. Bringing peace to the country will require engagement that is firmly rooted in the everyday realities of the people of South Sudan.

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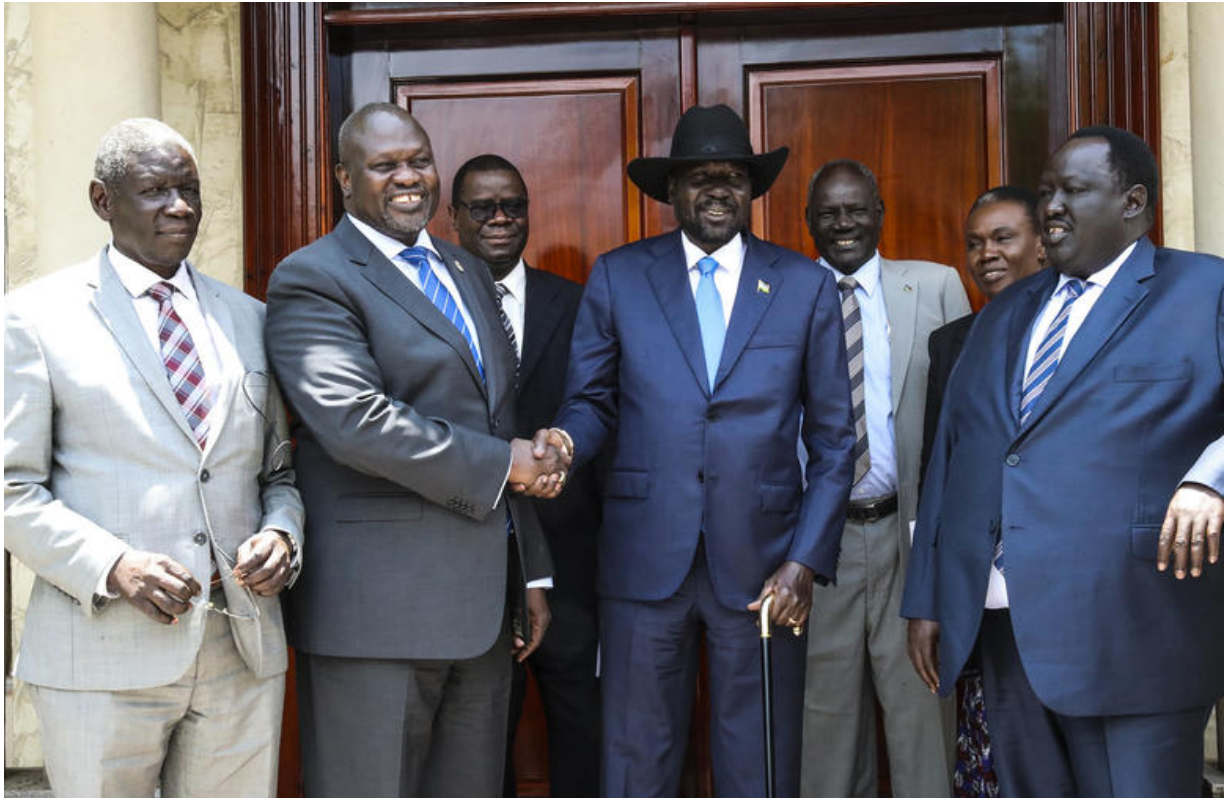
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By: Susan Stigant

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Global Health



South Sudan: Hope for the Best, Plan for the Worst

Monday, October 7, 2019

By: David Deng; Aly Verjee

With little more than a month left before a new transitional government is set to assume power in South Sudan, efforts to keep the latest peace agreement on track are becoming more urgent, even as most key pre-transition deadlines have been missed and the political will of the belligerents remains in doubt. Given these circumstances, efforts to support the current process remain vitally necessary and thorough planning for the worst-case scenarios is also desperately needed in case South Sudan's fragile peace collapses.

Type: Analysis and Commentary

Conflict Analysis & Prevention



Ceasefire Monitoring in South Sudan 2014–2019: “A Very Ugly Mission”

Friday, August 30, 2019

By: Aly Verjee

More than five years after South Sudan’s first ceasefire agreement, ceasefire monitors are still on the ground. The hope was that their work would help overcome the mistrust between rival factions, halt ongoing violence, and deter further violations. Drawing on interviews with monitors, combatants, politicians, civil society representatives, diplomats, peacekeepers, and others, this report examines the history of ceasefire monitoring in South Sudan and offers recommendations for donors supporting future monitoring processes in South Sudan and elsewhere.

Type: Peaceworks

Global Policy; Peace Processes



The Religious Landscape in South Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities for Engagement

Thursday, June 20, 2019

By: Jacqueline Wilson

Since the beginning of South Sudan's civil war in 2013, the country's religious actors have sought to play an active role in turning the tide from war and violence to peace and reconciliation. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and consultations, this report maps the religious landscape of South Sudan and showcases the legitimate and influential religious actors and institutions, highlights challenges impeding their peace work, and provides recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to better engage with religious actors for peace.

Type: Peaceworks

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