

PEACE IN PIECES: THE POLITICS AND PITFALLS OF PEACEMAKING IN SOUTH SUDAN

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Introduction

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has remained one of the world's most fragile states and has been engulfed in cycles of violence. The euphoria of independence was short-lived, as internal contestations among local ethnic groups quickly surfaced. As stated in a speech by the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres, "All the dark clouds of a perfect storm have descended upon the people of the world's newest country, and one of the poorest" (UNDP 2025, 1).

The rivalry between President Salva Kiir Mayardit and his deputy, Dr. Riek Machar, has persistently plunged the country into civil war and a humanitarian crisis since 2013 (de Waal 2014; Craze 2019). The political violence has been fuelled by ethnic rivalries, especially between the Dinkas, of which Kiir is a member, and the Nuer, of which Machar is one. Both national and international efforts at peacemaking have so far failed to end the conflict.

The failures of both the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in 2015 and the Revitalised ARCSS (R-ARCSS) in 2018 point to the weaknesses of peace processes that are elite-driven and facilitated by external actors (Vertin 2018). This situation has been further precipitated by the killing of General Majur Dak during a United Nations evacuation in Nasir County in March 2025 and the detention of Machar (Radio Tamazuj 2025). The renewed clashes between government forces

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and opposition-aligned militias, particularly in Upper Nile, have led to grave concerns over the targeting of civilians and the obstruction of humanitarian access (Sudans Post 2025). As of October 2025, more than nine million people, or over two-thirds of the population, require humanitarian assistance due to acute food insecurity, mass displacement, and climate-related shocks, which have compounded the crisis (Agaba et al. 2025). Moreover, based on interviews conducted, the transitional government remains paralysed by mistrust, delayed elections, and the absence of meaningful accountability mechanisms. These conditions raise urgent questions about the viability of the peace process and the future of South Sudan's statehood.

The key questions that this study answers are: (i) Why have peace agreements signed in South Sudan failed so far?; (ii) What are the underlying socio-political and economic factors that contribute to these failures? (iii) What roles have regional and international actors played in enabling or undermining the achievement of sustainable peace? How can locally rooted initiatives be employed to complement peace efforts?

This paper interrogates the politics and challenges of peacemaking in South Sudan, examining why peace has been difficult to achieve despite commitments under the R-ARCSS. It argues that the peace process in South Sudan has been elite-centred and transactional rather than addressing the root causes of the conflict. Therefore, the conflict is usually postponed rather than addressed (Kiranda et al. 2016), a phenomenon this paper refers to as the 'revolving-door' syndrome. This syndrome speaks to the continuous relapse into violence due to the unresolved root causes of a conflict. Additionally, violence is often reconfigured and not addressed, with it gradually institutionalised and normalised over the years (Kiranda et al. 2016).

Over three decades of conflict, combined with the militarisation of political life and the absence of a functional state system and structure, created immediate challenges that prevented the country from remaining united and peaceful (Johnson 2012). As a result, the approach to independence and peacebuilding became militarised, relying on elite bargaining and power brokering, often with the support of international actors. Elite bargaining primarily concentrates on the interests and aspirations of political elites, with compromises made to end the violence. These agreements tended to sideline the wider society and overlooked the necessity of establishing the institutional foundations of a legitimate state.

This paper adopts a critical political economy approach to provide more profound reflections on peace-making and peacebuilding in South Sudan. Using this approach, the paper argues that peace agreements are not

neutral instruments of peace-making but are usually instruments shaped by the interests and intended outcomes of political elites. Thus, the paper challenges state-centric and elite paradigms of peace. It argues that conflict resolution efforts should seek to understand the entanglements of peace and power, be people-centred, and confront the critical questions of political transformation, justice, and legitimacy.

Methodologically, this paper adopts an interpretive and exploratory approach, grounded in the need to interrogate the politics and challenges of peace-making in South Sudan. Between October 2024 and September 2025, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 53 respondents (34 males and 21 females), most of whom are currently based in South Sudan and work for government, civil society, academic institutions, and international organisations. Additionally, to triangulate findings, the study analysed a wide range of secondary sources, including policies of the government, peace agreements, academic literature, reports by international organisations and civil society, and resolutions by the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Agency on Development (IGAD). Interviews were conducted virtually, with some conducted in the capital city by the author during field visits to the country in 2024 and 2025.

This paper is structured as follows: Section two presents the historical and structural roots of conflict in South Sudan; Section three interrogates the main peace agreements and their limitations; Section four examines the politics of inclusion and exclusion within peace processes; Section five assesses the role of regional and international actors; Section six examines bottom-top peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan; and Section seven assesses the factors that undermine long-term stability, accountability and statebuilding in South Sudan. The conclusion proposes a shift towards a more organic, inclusive, context-specific, and sensitive approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding in South Sudan.

The Context of Conflict: Historical and Structural Roots

Writing on the intractability of the conflict in South Sudan requires a deeper historical reflection on the effects of colonialism on the country and the structural challenges that state-formation and legitimacy continue to contend with. Thus, this section argues that decades of deprivation by the North, civil wars, ethnic fragmentation, and manipulation by political elites

all contributed to undermining South Sudan's ability to have a united front post-independence.

South Sudan's chequered history can be traced back to colonialism and its legacies. The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899-1956) administered the country using what was referred to as the "Southern-Policy", which was an indirect system of administration through tribal authorities (Collins 2008). The policy limited contact with the North, which the British paid much attention to, developing systems and elites that eventually took over after independence was gained in 1956. With independence, the Northern-Arab Islamic elites dominated the state, which eventually fuelled rebellion by the Southerners. Consequently, the country experienced two protracted civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005), led by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). Eventually, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed with the North in 2005, paving the way for South Sudan's independence in 2011. However, it was quickly realised that the South was plagued with ethno-political rivalries that affected a smooth transition, with nation-building consequently stalled. As argued by a senior government official in the country:

South Sudan's path to chaos was shaped decades before independence. It was apparent, even with the way some armed groups were changing their forms and challenging the SPLM/A, that trouble was ahead. Colonialism left the South deprived and marginalised. Politics was militarised, and the formation of what eventually became a state was achieved through a liberation movement that became the government. There was no time to carefully think through and prepare the country for independence and the realities a new state would face.²

Most respondents noted that the death of John Garang, who was widely accepted as the leader of the liberation struggle, in a helicopter crash in 2005, deepened the contestation for power in South Sudan. As noted by a veteran of the SPLM/A:

2 Interview of a senior government official from South Sudan conducted virtually by the author on 3 April 2025.

John Garang was a very charismatic and educated man. Although some of his Generals intermittently challenged him, he was accepted as the leader of the liberation struggle. He was also able to bring together people from the respective ethnic groups. However, Salva Kiir (a Dinka) and his vice president, Dr Riak Machar (a Nuer), have been locked in a rivalry that has deepened mistrust between them, plunging the country into a spiral of violence.³

The failure to focus on the internal challenges that were facing a society that had been trapped in decades of violence may have been an underestimation of the potential they may have to undermine the expectations of liberation and independence. As most respondents noted, South Sudan went into independence as a traumatised and wounded country, and there was a need to heal that trauma. Apparently, as they argued, the North was perceived as the common opponent, without an adequate analysis of the internal divisions and rivalries in the South. When interviewed on the post-independence challenges that South Sudan is contending with, a medical doctor working in the capital city, Juba, had this to say:

When analysing the conflict and violence in South Sudan, academics and practitioners usually tend to neglect the impact of the compounded transgenerational trauma that affects people in the country. South Sudan is a country where violence was normalised, with children growing up in a culture of war and violence. Thus, it was easier to transition from a civil war with the North to ethnic violence and political struggles after independence. There was limited capacity to focus on statebuilding. What was expected of the leaders in terms of peacebuilding was something they could not provide. There was no time to heal, and the trauma persists.⁴

The effects of trauma, especially prolonged and compounded trauma, on a society are usually understudied or focused on by academics when societies in conflict are studied. Writing on post-war Sierra Leone, Bangura (2024) argued that there is a tendency for violence and brutality to be reproduced in different forms in post-conflict countries if peacebuilding is not grounded in healing and reconciliation efforts.

A culture of violence has entrenched over the years, with young people socialising with it, a challenge that is fuelled by their marginalisation from socio-economic opportunities. Alongside this, most of them participa-

³ Interview of a veteran of the SPLM/A conducted virtually by the author on 23 May 2025.

⁴ Interview of a medical doctor working in Juba conducted virtually by the author on 15 April 2025.

ted in armed groups and are still affiliated with them, as mobilisation along ethnic lines continues. Alongside the security challenges, poverty, and the dependence on oil and the rentier economy that emerged, the conflict in the country and the elites' desire to dominate their rivals were exacerbated (International Crisis Group 2021b).

Efforts to quell the tension between the president and Machar led to the signing of a peace agreement, the ARCSS, in 2015, paving the way for Machar to be the Vice President of the country, with members of his faction, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO), provided with several positions in government. Despite this arrangement, there were intermittent tensions due to limited trust between the two groups. In 2016, Machar had to flee Juba when government troops attacked him after he was accused of plotting a coup against the president (Deutsche Welle 2016). The violence lasted almost two years, and another agreement, the R-ARCSS, signed in 2018, allowed him to return to Juba and be reinstated as the country's Vice President. However, the government's failure to plan and hold elections as agreed in the R-ARCSS has deepened mistrust in the country. According to most respondents, the Dinkas within the government are consolidating power and, at the same time, isolating other ethnic groups. These developments, in the face of an incomplete Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) process of ex-combatants, provide a conducive environment for the prolongation of the conflict in the country.

As the contentions over delayed elections intensified, international engagements have not succeeded in ending hostilities and inducing dialogue between the two primary principals, Machar and Kiir. Since March 2025, there have been two AU Peace and Security Council sessions on South Sudan, visits to Juba by the AU Commission, its Panel of the Wise, IGAD Council of Ministers meetings, a UN Security Council session on South Sudan, statements from the UN Secretary-General, as well as other high-profile visits, including South Africa and Kenya. Instead, the R-ARCSS has practically collapsed, with many SPLM-IO leaders, including Riek Machar, in detention and South Sudan again on the brink of a full-scale war. In a Reuters report by Denis Logonyi:

The government placed Machar under house arrest in March ... Machar has denied the allegations. His detention reignited fears of a return to full-blown civil war, with his supporters accusing the government of violating a 2018 peace and power-sharing agreement. Analysts say that Kiir's repeated shake-ups of the government and security apparatus are aimed at consolidating his hold on power and keeping various factions satisfied (Logonyi 2025, n.p.).

A few weeks after Machar's detention, President Kiir reinstated the veteran General Paul Nang Majok as Chief of Defence Forces, after initially sacking him in July 2025. It remains unclear what the president's intentions are. The respondents indicated that there has been a recent buildup of the military, as the conflict with the Nuers is expected to escalate, leaving open the question of what the future holds for South Sudan. Regional efforts to secure Machar's release have not been successful so far. An aid worker in Juba appeared shocked by the detention of Machar:

With the experience of 2016, I found it hard to believe that the president would attempt another arrest and detention of Riek Machar. The government should have considered the security and political implications, but it believed the Nuers could be quickly contained.⁵

Peace Agreements and Political Settlements: A Fragile Framework

Most respondents argued that there is a plethora of reasons for the failure of peace agreements in South Sudan, and that these reasons are structural, with limited implementation of agreed-upon commitments (Gai 2025). Mechanisms such as the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, the Compensation and Reparation Authority, though legislated, remain stalled or under-resourced, reflecting more profound governance deficits and resistance to accountability (Akech 2020).

A total of forty-three respondents indicated that there is limited sincerity on the part of conflicting parties. Furthermore, the respondents argued that the agreements are tailored to accommodate elites rather than to focus on lasting solutions in the search for peace. A teacher in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) expressed her frustration:

⁵ Interview of an aid worker in Juba conducted virtually by the author on 23 April 2025.

Agreements are signed to temporarily halt violence and satisfy the elites' egos. We all know that the wars fought are driven by the need of warlords to position themselves and either secure access to power or further grip it. The Dinkas and the Nuers have not sat down to have a sincere dialogue on the need to give the country a genuine opportunity to emerge as a nation, united under one flag. Until that dialogue is held, with the elites realising that the nation is bigger than the egos and aspirations, violence will continue looming.⁶

This paper examines three key agreements signed in the last 20 years, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) of 2015, and its revitalised version (R-ARCSS) of 2018.

After several attempts at peace, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005. Most respondents in this study indicated that the agreement was elite-based and that international actors also sought to see the South freed from the North. They argued that the agreement did not adequately prepare the South for independence. By this, they meant that the internal dynamics within the South were not adequately considered by those negotiating peace and independence. The ability and readiness of Southerners to move from militarised politics to national and local governance were not adequately examined, as respondents argued. Thus, political and economic interests, especially over oil revenues, led to immediate factionalism and competition for a place in the executive, thereby weakening the young state and undermining its effective formation (de Waal 2014). The stage was therefore set for internal strife and political violence.

After decades of a violent civil war between the North and the South, the CPA, signed in 2005, sought to address the historical grievances of the South. Thus, formulae were developed to facilitate wealth and power sharing, and a referendum was organised, paving the way for South Sudan's independence (Young 2012). While the agreement succeeded in ending the conflict between the North and the South, respondents argued that the negotiators mainly focused on ending the violence but did not try to understand the power and resource dynamics among the southerners. Some respondents even indicated that for decades, the North preyed on the vulnerabilities of the South and the contentious relationships that were emerging among ethnic and belligerent factions, to tighten its grip on the region and further marginalise them. Thus, to them, the CPA was a bargain among competing elites,

⁶ Interview of a teacher in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) conducted virtually by the author on 30 September 2025.

leaving out the wishes and aspirations and the need for democratic inclusion, national healing, and reconciliation. Consequently, state formation was weak, and the South was not adequately mentored toward independence by the international actors who had brokered the peace.

The contested status of the Abyei Special Administrative Area between Sudan and South Sudan exemplifies these unresolved tensions, as despite its strategic importance and symbolic weight, its final status remains undecided (Kumar et al. 2020). As Johnson (2012) highlights, the CPA's failure to address the complexities of border communities and identity-based claims leaves Abyei in a state of legal and political limbo. This omission is further compounded by the ongoing crisis in Sudan and its spill-over effect in border regions such as Abyei, which have exacerbated insecurity, disrupted humanitarian access and stalled diplomatic efforts to resolve territorial disputes.

The emergence of the SPLM/A as the government of an independent South Sudan presented its own challenges, as warlords from other factions questioned the SPLM/A's dominance and the need for a broader, more inclusive approach to governance. Governance became mainly militarised, with Kiir seeking to satisfy the SPLM/A and Dinkas at the expense of other groups. This created dissension, leading President Kiir to indicate in 2013 that his deputy, Machar, was plotting a coup against him. The violence that erupted led to the death of approximately 400,000 people, with over 4 million displaced (Center for Preventive Action 2025). Both regional and international actors, especially the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), are involved. Became instrumental in negotiating ceasefires and the ARCSS in August 2015.

Unlike the CPA of 2005, the ARCSS included components addressing the need for transitional justice mechanisms, including the establishment of a Hybrid Court to try perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity (IGAD 2015). Additionally, it called for a transitional government of national unity, the decentralisation of power, Security Sector Reform (SSR), and DDR. While power sharing initially appeared to work, a trust deficit between the two leaders emerged, with negative consequences. In July 2016, there was a relapse into violence as the two forces clashed in Juba, with Machar forced to flee the city (International Crisis Group 2021a).

As with previous efforts, after several attempts to broker a cease-fire agreement, regional and international actors succeeded in brokering a peace agreement. The R-ARCSS was signed in September 2018, this time with broader components, including a constitutional reform process, the conduct

of elections involving all identified armed and opposition groups, and strengthened commitments to the transitional justice process. A vital addition was the need to integrate armed groups into the national army (R-ARCSS 2018). The agreement brought renewed hope, as national actors, including religious leaders, were vocal in encouraging the belligerent factions to sign and respect it. However, shortly after the signing of the agreement, structural and other factors affecting the implementation of the previous agreement surfaced. There were delays in implementing the agreement and key commitments, including the establishment of the unity government, which was not achieved until 2020. Coupled with this, the SSR and Hybrid Court processes never picked up, and DDR stalled after initial attempts.

With numerous armed groups and militias, for instance, the National Salvation Front (NAS) and the South Sudan United Front/Army (SSUF/A), formed along narrow ethnic or opportunistic agendas, some of which are active in combat, maintaining a unified army became difficult. Most remain loyal to their commanders or ethnic groups and are unsure of the government's intentions (International Crisis Group 2021a). Despite this, the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) was subsequently established, with portfolios at the various levels of government provided to the signatories of the agreement. However, the bulk of the respondents agreed that public confidence had remained low in the ability of peace agreements to succeed. As argued by a peace expert interviewed:

Peace agreements are products of political will and interests. They can only succeed if the elites are willing to see them succeed. If that will is not available, it is just a matter of time before there is a collapse. It takes a while to build trust, and this has not been given much attention in South Sudan.⁷

By 2024, the government and international partners agreed that there was a need to incorporate armed groups that were not part of the 2018 Agreement. Kenya hosted what became known as the Tumaini Initiative to respond to the need for an inclusive approach to peace and stability in South Sudan (United Nations Mission in South Sudan 2024). However, the process remains inconclusive.

It has become clear over the years that the lack of consequences for violations of the agreements has led to limited compliance by elites on all sides of the conflict. Additionally, international actors such as Uganda have openly

⁷ Interview of a peace expert conducted by the author on 11 September 2025.

taken the government's side and deployed troops in the country upon the president's request (Assessment Capacities Project 2025). Most respondents stated that the elites expected to enforce the agreements are the ones most keen to violate them. They emphasised that holding democratic elections, or even having state institutions that could hold elites responsible for their actions, runs counter to what some elites would like to see. As such, it becomes difficult for any agreement to succeed, and peace is usually temporary because it is not grounded in accountability, local ownership, and legitimacy.

The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion

Most respondents in the study stated that there is exclusionary politics in South Sudan, which has deepened the country's divide over the years. They stated that there are three common factors on which exclusion is premised: political control, economic dominance, and ethnic marginalisation.

Speaking on political control, an academic in Juba had this to say:

The Dinka elites who emerged in post-independence South Sudan believe that they own the state, and it is their private property. They cannot live with the thought that other ethnic groups want them to share power. They want total control of the state, and to them, that also means control over its institutions. This level of dominance they want to maintain could be based on their experience with the North.⁸

The Dinkas who dominate the SPLM/A believe that they have liberated the country and should continue holding on to power. Based on interviews, Kiir is believed to share that view and has been strategically positioning his people, while his relationship with Machar has remained lukewarm over the years. This could be seen in the frequency of the tensions between them that erupt in violence.

It must be noted that during the liberation struggle, the Nuer and the Dinka clashed on several occasions, with Machar intermittently switching sides with the North, an act that undermined the trust in him by the Dinka. As reported by the BBC:

⁸ Interview of an academic in Juba conducted virtually by the author on 11 September 2025.

Mr Kiir labelled him as a “prophet of doom”, continuing his actions of the past - an apparent reference to the fact that he had challenged the authority of Mr Garang, the SPLM’s founding leader, in the early 1990s. That challenge resulted in Mr Machar forming a breakaway rebel group, eventually signing his own peace accord with Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir’s government in 1997, before becoming an assistant to the president. Even after he left to re-launch a rebellion, Mr Garang’s SPLM remained deeply suspicious of him, accusing him of receiving covert support from the Khartoum government - a charge he denied (BBC 2018, n.p.).

Some respondents referred to Machar as keen to seize power and as not genuine in his approach to the country’s peace process. Whatever the case may be, the influence of the two leaders on their respective ethnic groups has culminated in a sharp divide that fosters exclusionary politics, with the Dinkas currently dominating the political landscape.

Closely tied to political control is economic dominance, especially given the resources generated by the country’s vast oil deposits. The struggle for independence was based on the political and economic marginalisation of the South by the North, and independence gave the Southern elites access to resources they had not had before. Furthermore, the lack of institutions to regulate the economy and enhance accountability and transparency led to an elite drive to control the country’s wealth. Other ethnic groups also began competing for the state’s resources, leading to clashes.

Some respondents stated that the need for both economic and political control by the elites in power has made it difficult for the government to conduct constitutional reviews and hold elections. The delays frustrate other ethnic and political groups, with them justifying violence as the only means of communicating their grievances. For instance, elections slated for 2024 were postponed to 2026, with reasons proffered including allowing “the South Sudanese government to address crucial prerequisites for a successful election, including conducting a comprehensive constitutional review, establishing election laws, and completing a national census” (Dicken 2025, 1). While the government argued that these steps were important for preparing for the stable democratisation process, most respondents stated that elites are unwilling to face the potential or unintended consequences of democratic elections.

Ethnic marginalisation has been central to politics and violence in South Sudan. Since independence, there has been a primary focus on integrating Nuers in government. However, it is not only the Nuers who have been prone to exclusion, but also others, including the Murle, Equatorians,

and Shilluk. In fact, they have largely been excluded from decision-making processes and dialogues in the country (Schomerus and Aalen 2016). The Dinkas have maintained ethnic hegemony, deepening exclusion and inequalities in the country. The Nuers have strong ethnic militias that persistently challenge the state, which keeps them actively involved in power-sharing exercises, a strength the others do not necessarily have. Some respondents stated that there must be a formula for decentralising power, with states taking responsibility for their governance and opening the space for inclusivity and participation by all ethnic groups.

With the three areas of exclusion examined above, this point is reinforced: inclusion and participation in leadership and decision-making processes in South Sudan are based on an elite bargain that also shapes the outcomes of peace agreements. This approach enhances co-optation but not genuine participation. It also reinforces the fact that armed mobilisation and violence are the secured path to political relevance and inclusion, which is something that peace agreements should seek to discourage, rather than foster (de Waal 2014). Additionally, it normalises impunity and presents difficulties in bringing to book those who commit war crimes. Hence, the failure to implement the transitional justice mechanisms agreed on.

Most respondents also noted that while some women participated in the dialogues that led to the 2018 agreement, the approach to leadership and governance has been gerontocratic and patriarchal. Even with the women who participated in negotiations, whom some respondents argued were tokenistically included, to avoid the criticisms of the 2015 agreement, their contributions have not been fully recorded or presented, as stated by Bazugba et al. (2018, n.p.):

To date, insufficient attention has been paid to the significant contribution of South Sudanese women's groups and representatives to the peace process. Not only did they play important roles in ensuring that the process moved forward and that women and other key constituencies were included in the talks, but they also made significant contributions to the peace agreement's content, including gender-specific provisions.

Decades of marginalisation and infantilisation of both youth and women will take years of investment in structural changes and civic education to be turned around, as argued in the section below. Despite this, the failure to achieve peace has limited the country's ability to address critical questions related to the rights, freedoms, welfare, and dignity of the South Sudanese.

The Role of Regional and International Actors

International and regional actors have been playing leading roles in the quest for peace in South Sudan. However, interviews and secondary sources observed that the roles have both enabling and constraining effects. The *Troika*, consisting of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway (US Department of State 2025), the AU and its Regional Economic Community (REC), IGAD, and the UN have been playing a leading role in supporting the peace processes in South Sudan. In fact, the UN has one of the longest and largest ever-deployed missions in the country, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Beyond the three actors named above, there have been international organisations and regional governments, including Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya, that have been serving as moral guarantors.

As indicated above, Uganda's role has been conflicting, as it supports the government militarily and takes sides in active combat when the regime is threatened (Al Jazeera 2025). According to respondents, Yoweri Museveni has positioned himself as a regional leader and has military and economic interests there, as was previously seen in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Thus, having formed strategic ties with the regime in South Sudan, he prefers to keep that regime in power, while playing a negotiating role. Given that Uganda shares a strategic border with South Sudan and imports large quantities of goods and services from Uganda, the alliance is beneficial to Museveni. This paradox raises questions about the interests, legitimacy, and efficacy of external actors' support for the search for peace in South Sudan.

IGAD has been central to the negotiations and signing of the ARCSS in 2015 and the R-ARCSS in 2018. With the support of the AU, IGAD has the legitimacy to convene warring factions and negotiate peace. However, competing political interests within the organisations undermine their ability to make unilateral decisions and to hold accountable actors who violate the agreements. The AU, which should support IGAD during difficult moments, lacks both the human and financial resources to intervene and ensure accountability in the implementation of agreements in South Sudan (Levi 2025). Resolutions issued are usually ignored, which weakens the Union's position and leaves South Sudanese with limited confidence in the AU's actions, as most respondents stated.

The UNMISS has been plagued with challenges since its deployment in the country. While most of its role is operational, for instance, with the pro-

tection of civilians, it has been criticised, especially by the public, for several reasons. For instance, most respondents indicated that they expected that the mission should have been much more responsive in saving lives where there were outright attacks against civilians. It was also observed during field visits to South Sudan that civilians expected more than what the mission's mandate allowed. However, beyond the mandate, South Sudan is a vast country and challenging to monitor fully. Thus, logistical and terrain-related constraints limit the UN's ability to respond quickly when needed. Furthermore, the UN, like civilians, have been constantly attacked by both government forces and other factions, with accusations of taking sides. This has succeeded in quietly cornering the mission to be much more sensitive to the realities on the ground, with reliance placed on diplomatic rather than military pressure on the parties to the conflict (Duursma 2021). The posture of the mission leaves an open field for the factions to operate in, thereby entrenching resistance to reform and the required political changes.

China remains a key partner of the government and focuses on economic diplomacy. At the same time, the US, the United Kingdom and Norway continue to provide financial and technical support to peace efforts in the country (International Crisis Group 2021b). However, donor funds for the country are dwindling, especially with the abrupt stop of support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Additionally, some respondents stated that donor fatigue is setting in, as the conflict persists. This has led to cuts in peace and development projects. The private sector remains weak, and economic activity outside Juba is informal due to insecurity. As such, the contributions of the private sector to peace initiatives remain minimal.

Sudan, on the other hand, is currently engulfed in its own crisis and is less focused on South Sudan. As observed by respondents, the multiplicity of international actors and their divergent interests provide room for the elites to play them, with relationships shifting. Thus, there has not been a common approach among international actors in the country.

It is also worth noting that the international actors intended the reduction in oil production in 2012 to pressure a new agreement with Sudan, which is responsible for transporting oil produced in the South. Without oil revenues to buy loyalty from numerous tribal leaders, the clientelist system created by Salva Kiir collapsed, and his government started to face challenges, including from Riek Machar. Besides being an immediate cause of the 2013 conflict between the SPLA and the SPLA-IO, this fact also helps explain the

interplay among political, economic, and ethnic disputes in the country (Silva 2025; Day et al. 2019).

Peace from Below? Civil Society, Women, and Local Initiatives

Decades of violence have appeared to be stimulating an organic, grassroots-led search for peace in communities across South Sudan. Excluded from formal peace processes and leadership roles, organisations owned and led by women and youth have been actively implementing peace initiatives. As a youth activist stated:

It reached a point where we, the young people, needed to take our destiny into our hands. We formed the Youth for Peace organisation in Juba and have been working with our peers to build a culture of peace. The more we engage our peers, the better for the future of our country. Peace, like violence, is a mindset, and can be positively inculcated by our generation, and the time is now.⁹

The words of the interviewee are in line with the mantra of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed” (UNESCO 1966, 1). The consciousness that is evolving is helping to have young people and women engage their peers on the need to resist being influenced to join armed groups.

Some respondents stated that the vulnerabilities of young people and the exposure to, and socialisation with, violence are leading to some in major towns forming or becoming members of gangs and cliques. Consequently, awareness of peacebuilding efforts focuses on creating safer communities and educating young people to adopt positive lifestyles. The European Union (EU) is one of the leading funders supporting grassroots peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan, with communities trained to create the changes they would like to see. For instance, in 2024, the author assessed an EU-funded project titled “Supporting community resilience and non-violent conflict management in conflict and flood-affected areas of Upper Nile and Jonglei States, South Sudan”. This was a three-million-euro project implemented by

⁹ Interview of a youth activist conducted by the author in Juba on 24 March 2025.

Solidarités International for two years¹⁰. Projects such as these help provide communities with the tools they need to self-mobilise and undertake conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts.

Respondents stated that religious leaders have been promoting peace and reconciliation in the country. In 2015, the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) published an Action Plan for Peace that has, over the last decade, served as a framework for local-level engagement, especially where the state's presence is limited (South Sudan Council of Churches 2023). The moral leadership provided is critical, especially given the influence of religion in the lives of South Sudanese. Tied to this, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church uses trauma counselling and public forums to promote interethnic dialogues.

While civil society is still in its infancy and less developed, local NGOs are seen to play an active role in supporting peace and reconciliation efforts in communities. Researchers such as Bedigen (2021) have written on the increasing role that local women play in peacebuilding in South Sudan. However, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) face financial resource challenges that limit their ability to sustain or expand their activities. They are also disconnected from national peace initiatives, thereby limiting the potential that an integrated and inclusive approach could have provided the country.

The limited presence of the state has led most people to rely on traditional leaders and their structures for dispute resolution. These elders facilitate intercommunal dialogues, broker peace, and keep communities together, usually guided by customs and tradition (Ndonga 2024). The local justice mechanisms are much more accessible, known and trusted by the locals than the formal justice system.

The availability of grassroots initiatives for peace and reconciliation presents an opportunity for the government and development partners to explore a more sustainable approach to peacebuilding in South Sudan. Thus, investments should target these organisations and structures at the local level, with connections made between them and national efforts. Additionally, CSOs, traditional leaders, and religious leaders should be recognised as integral components of peacebuilding efforts and empowered to own the process. Their contributions will help shape the future of South Sudan for the better.

¹⁰ The author monitored EU-funded projects for over a decade in South Sudan as part of the Result-Oriented Monitoring (ROM) missions of the Union.

Beyond Peace Agreements: Long-Term Stability, Accountability and Statebuilding

While peace agreements have succeeded in providing short-term relief through elite-bargaining and positioning, South Sudan has, as indicated above, continuously suffered from a relapse to violence. The post-peace agreement periods are usually fraught with tension, with a limited focus on security, stability, and state-building. Respondents provided recommendations on how to promote reconciliation and statebuilding in the country.

A total of 41 respondents stated that there needs to be a national dialogue organised and facilitated by local actors, including religious and traditional leaders, to discuss both the present and future of the country. Some respondents suggested that the facilitators review all previous peace agreements and the reasons for their failures to prepare better to address historical grievances. A lawyer in Juba said:

What South Sudan should avoid moving forward with are arrangements that are mainly elite-driven. We need to move beyond peace agreements to national dialogues that take into account grievances and frustrations from across the country. The process should be inclusive and owned, especially by the country's youth and women, who are the most affected by conflicts.¹¹

Coupled with the national dialogue process, most respondents stated that the country needs a transitional justice process that will promote healing, reconciliation, and justice for victims of the conflicts. All the mechanisms recommended by the agreements, including the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, Compensation and Reparation Authority (CRA), and a Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH), have not been established. This undermines public trust and confidence in peace agreements, and as argued by the respondents, they are not people-centred or owned. This is especially given the fact that the outcomes benefit the elites and leave citizens with limited hope, with impunity entrenched. Respondents, however, recommended that any transitional justice programme invest in psychosocial support and reparations for victims. Experiences from countries such as Sierra Leone show that victims of civil wars are usually provided with limited support to address their psychosocial challenges, thereby leaving communities traumatised and with the potential of relapsing into violence.

¹¹ Interview of a lawyer in Juba conducted by the author in Juba on 13 March 2024.

Most of the respondents stated that it will be difficult for South Sudan to achieve sustainable peace without a transition from a militarised approach to governance to one embedded in democratic good governance. This will require structural transformation and the re-engineering of the state to embrace diversity and inclusivity. Central to this process should be the constitutional review process and the establishment of peace infrastructure that will adopt an organic approach to peacebuilding. A new and democratic constitution will be instrumental in creating institutions of state that would help promote accountability and discourage inequalities. As of 2025, the constitution-making process has not commenced, and many transitional institutions have been weakened by political interference, delays, and lack of financial resources (Kuol 2025). The process requires political will and interest to succeed, and this has been a challenge so far. Furthermore, the commissioners were nominated by the parties to the agreement, reinforcing another elite arrangement for a constitution that should support a democratic transition while addressing the root causes of the conflict.

Most of the respondents argued that for any peace process to succeed, there should be improvements in the country's socio-economic conditions. The increasing vulnerability stemming from limited access to economic opportunities is preyed on by armed groups, with a ready-made army of young people available for recruitment. Peace agreements by themselves do not guarantee peace; they provide a roadmap that could foster it, and commitments need to be transformed into action (Kane 2019).

The absence of a peace dividend and the continued absence of the state in the lives of most citizens raise doubts about the relevance of peace agreements. What most respondents indicated that they would like to see is a shared vision for democratic good governance in South Sudan that is centred on healing, inclusivity and participation, justice and accountability. These changes will help to promote public trust in the peacebuilding process in South Sudan.

Conclusion

In 2011, South Sudan gained independence after decades of civil war with the North. The agreement signed in 2005 ended the war and paved the way for independence, but did not provide a framework that took into consideration internal grievances in the South, beyond those against the North. Independence ushered in militarised governance with the SPLM/A leading a

unity government alongside the Nuers. However, the lack of a national vision and agenda, and an elite-driven power-sharing approach, minimised the focus on nation-building and addressing historical grievances. The fragile political arrangement, which was transactional rather than transformational, quickly crumbled in 2013 as it was unsustainable. The two agreements signed in 2015 and 2018 have not succeeded, with violence looming across the country.

The use of the critical political economy approach strengthened the conclusion that peace agreements are political processes whose success or failure depends on the parties' willingness to comply with them. Additionally, the case of South Sudan remains complex, as agreements are transactional and elite-centred, and lessons from the 2013 crisis did not lead to an overhaul of the approach used when the 2018 agreement was developed. Thus, there was no pathway to inclusive nation-building and structural transformation. Key components of the 2018 agreement, including those related to transitional justice and the constitutional review process, remain unimplemented. Also, the struggle for political and economic dominance has led to the ostracisation of smaller ethnic groups from governance arrangements.

International actors need to use context-specific, local and home-grown approaches to promote sustainable peacebuilding in the country. There needs to be a shift from a reactive, state-centric approach to a longer-term investment in infrastructures for peace. The inclusion of vital groups such as civil society, religious and traditional leaders will go a long way in enhancing local ownership and the legitimacy of the process.

The paper concludes that there is a need for a national dialogue to broaden participation and re-engineer the political space to promote a culture of peace and inclusive governance. Without this approach, peace will remain elusive and the promise of independence unachieved.

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the politics and difficulties of peacemaking in South Sudan, analysing why it remains elusive despite commitments under the R-ARCSS. The key questions examined are: (i) why have the peace agreements signed so far failed; (ii) what underlying socio-political and economic factors contribute to these failures; and (iii) what roles have regional and international actors played in promoting or hindering the realisation of sustainable peace. Moreover, it asks how locally rooted initiatives can support peace efforts. Methodologically, the paper adopts an interpretive and exploratory approach focused on analysing the politics and challenges of peacemaking in South Sudan. Additionally, it employs a critical political economy perspective to deepen understanding of peacemaking and peacebuilding within the country. By applying this approach, it is argued that peace agreements are not neutral tools but are often shaped by the interests and goals of political elites. In this regard, the paper challenges state-centric and elite-focused paradigms of peace. It is further argued that the peace process has been dominated by elites and driven by transactions rather than addressing the root causes of the conflict. As a result, conflicts are more often postponed than resolved — a phenomenon described as the “revolving-door” syndrome. It is also argued that conflict resolution should seek to understand the complex relationship between peace and power, be people-centred, and tackle crucial issues related to political transformation, justice, and legitimacy. It is concluded that a national dialogue is essential to expand participation and reshape the political space, fostering a culture of peace and inclusive governance. Without such an approach, peace will remain out of reach, and the promise of independence will remain unfulfilled.

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