

From the Region to the Grassroots: Political Dynamics in South Sudan

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Introduction

At this writing, the peace process in South Sudan remains at a critical juncture. The transitional government of national unity was due to be formed by the end of the extended pre-transitional period on 12 November 2019. Instead, the signatories to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) agreed, at the 7 November summit hosted by Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, to push back the deadline for another 100 days. The parties have so far failed to implement key commitments relating to security arrangements, a determination of the number of states, and financing of pre-transitional activities. It remains uncertain whether they will address these issues or whether they will continue to stall, and whether that stalling implies preparation for renewed conflict. The implementation of the peace deal now hinges partially on the success of ongoing regional consultations.

The latest developments in the peace process are taking place amidst major shifts in political power and ongoing political instability in the region. The fall of President Omar el-Bashir and the establishment of a joint civil-military transitional government in Sudan, coupled with rapid political changes in Ethiopia, have made for an unpredictable context. Meanwhile, in the face of reduced UK and US attention to Africa, and in light of a range of national interests in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, Middle Eastern states are increasing their bilateral engagement with potentially negative consequences for peace and security in the region.



Women's peace march, South Sudan, 2016.
Photo credit: Angelina Daniel Seeka

Regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) provide a potential space to respond to these various challenges based

¹ Please note the brief is a synthesis and does not necessarily represent individual views. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the paper's author David Deng and the editorial team, including Rachel Ibreck. We warmly thank all the members of the CRP South Sudan panel and Alex de Waal, Edward Thomas, Matt Benson, and Alice Robinson for their contributions.

upon norms, principles and institutions, but these institutions have not been able to overcome the transactional politics of a regional elite that has tended to prioritize their narrow self-interest over longer-term peace. This policy brief reflects on regional influences in peace processes based on insights from a panel of thirteen prominent South Sudanese scholars, academics and activists. The discussion took place during the second annual meeting of the Conflict Research Programme (CRP) South Sudan Research Panel.² The aim of the panel was to review the research and policy recommendations of the CRP; to create a novel space for debates between South Sudanese intellectuals; and to develop policy-relevant insights.

The Grassroots: Trends in Nonviolent Mobilisation in South Sudan

While mass protests in places such as Sudan and Ethiopia have dominated the headlines in recent years, South Sudan has also been witnessing the quiet emergence of nascent social movements based on nonviolence. Campaigns such as [#SouthSudanIsWatching](#), [#WaashJunub](#), New Tribe, [AnaTaban](#), and the [90-day countdown](#) to the establishment of the new transitional government, are most familiar to a relatively small portion of South Sudanese that are active on social media. Yet they could also be laying the ground for more robust citizen-led demands for peace in the future. Moreover, recent strikes by judges, politically charged sermons by individual church leaders, and other less visible demonstrations of civilian discontent at the local level suggest the need to reconsider the form that nonviolent resistance might take in the South Sudanese context and how it can reinforce other efforts to secure a more lasting solution to the conflict.³

The apparent success of civilian-led protests in Sudan has rekindled conversations in South Sudan about the potential role of nonviolent resistance in stimulating political, social and economic reform.⁴ The seemingly-impossible odds against which the Sudanese civilian protestors struggled, their resilience in the face of violence from the security forces, the skilful use of information technology, the support from the diaspora, and the amount of time and planning that it took to lay the foundation for a social movement are all aspects that resonate with South Sudanese.

Yet, as sceptics of citizen-led efforts are quick to point out, South Sudan is a very different place from Sudan. Labour unions and professional associations are far less developed and do not have the same history of political action. Opposition political parties tend to be weak, dominated by one or two personalities and easily co-opted by the ruling party, and the government's position is strengthened by its unrestrained access to oil revenue. Society is divided along various lines, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, centre-periphery dynamics, and between the military and civilians, making it very difficult to envisage an inclusive mass mobilisation of people around a single cause.

As innovative as the more recent campaigning is, the civil society groups behind these initiatives have not yet been able to mobilise people at a scale needed to provoke meaningful change. They are also heavily reliant on international support, and their ability to have impact is constrained by externally framed objectives, short timeframes, and one-off projects that do not allow for sustained relationships with constituencies over the long-term. The church has the infrastructure, networks and clout that could overcome many of these constraints, but the

² The meeting was held in Kampala, Uganda 1-3 July 2019. The Conflict Research Programme (CRP) is a UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded initiative at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). CRP aims to understand why contemporary violence is so difficult to end. It analyses the underlying political economy of violence with a view to informing policy. In addition to South Sudan, the CRP is conducting research in Iraq, Syria, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. For additional information, visit the CRP page on the LSE website at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/conflict-and-civil-society/conflict-research-programme>.

³ Nabeel Biajo, *South Sudanese judges strike despite dismissal*, Voice of America (VOA) News (14 Jul. 2018), <https://www.voanews.com/africa/south-sudanese-judges-strike-continues-despite-dismissals>; CRP Briefing, *Impact of the Sudanese Revolution on South Sudan* (20 May 2019) (referencing crowds chanting against governor during wrestling match in Bor), <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2019/05/Briefing-South-Sudan-20052019.pdf>.

⁴ See e.g. Maria J. Stephan and Nicholas Zaremba, *In South Sudan, Nonviolent Action is Essential to Building Peace*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP) (22 Feb. 2019), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/02/south-sudan-nonviolent-action-essential-building-peace>.

institution has been plagued by many of the same divisions that have affected society as a whole and tends to soften its messaging for fear of being seen as too political.

While a Khartoum-style civilian uprising may not be possible or even desirable in South Sudan in the short-term, this should not discount other more targeted and strategic forms of nonviolent resistance. One key consideration is how social movements frame their objectives. Rather than a more technical approach that addresses elite politics and developments in the peace process, civic groups could start by mobilizing around basic necessities, such as the price of food, the availability of medicines in the market, and the failure to pay salaries to public employees. To the extent that social movements are able to rally around basic standards of social and economic justice, it could help to catalyse efforts that could later be channelled towards more political objectives. Nor should civic groups shy away from their international networks. While it is important to be aware of the drawbacks of external financing, partnerships with international actors also provide opportunities to leverage international political and diplomatic support around campaign objectives.

Moving forward, civic groups should find ways of tapping into South Sudanese cultures and experiences more directly to enhance their legitimacy and counteract narratives that portray them as proxies of foreign interests. Among some Nuer groups, for example, when women mobilise and go to places where men are fighting, the men are traditionally required to disperse. Indeed, women's groups have been at the forefront of civilian calls for peace, as seen in several peace marches that women have organized in South Sudan over the years.⁵ The Wunlit process of the mid-1990s and other people-to-people peace processes also provide insights into organizational strategies that have been successful in the South Sudanese context. The Wunlit process, for example, took years of painstaking work by faith leaders and politicians on both sides of the divide to build a diverse base of support for the initiative that spanned the conflict divide.

As social movements continue to mature in the years to come, the ultimate determinant of success will be their ability to create inclusive platforms that are accessible to South Sudanese from all walks of life and resistant to the divisive and politicised rhetoric that currently permeates these spaces. This will require an entrepreneurial approach on the part of civic leaders, to draw on how nonviolent resistance has been organised, and the strategies and tactics in other contexts, while also being responsive to local norms, circumstances and security threats in South Sudan.

Two Countries, One System? The Interdependent Politics of the Two Sudans

The dramatic political ousting of Sudanese President, Omar el-Bashir, through sustained and widespread civilian protests in Sudan in mid-2019 had implications for the peace process in South Sudan. Under Bashir, Sudan exerted pressure on the warring parties in South Sudan and was credited for helping to steer the High-Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF) process towards the signing of the R-ARCSS. Concerns lingered over the sustainability of the agreements reached in Khartoum and whether Sudan had finally decided to prioritize an end to the conflict or was merely pursuing bilateral interests under the guise of a peace process.

New leadership in Sudan presents both opportunities and threats. So far, the direction appears to be positive, but the changes in Sudan have provoked reflections on the broader relationship between the Sudans. Is crisis in Sudan necessarily opportunity for South Sudan and vice versa? Are the Sudans destined to be bound by conflict, or is there potential for them to support one another on a joint path to sustainable peace?

Historically, political elites in the two countries have tended to view their interactions as zero-sum: a benefit for one side was necessarily interpreted to mean a loss for the other. This is the logic that contributed to the failure of the 'one country, two systems' model that would see the

⁵ *Women take to the streets to demand end to South Sudan war*, Al Jazeera (10 Dec. 2017), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/women-mouths-taped-shut-demand-sudan-war-171209214901540.html>.

two regions progress along distinct but mutually reinforcing development paths, and the rise of the 'two countries, one system' model in which similarly repressive, authoritarian states entrenched themselves in both countries and waged wars against their opponents with devastating consequences for civilians.

Since the secession of South Sudan, Sudan had seemed to have the upper hand in the political game between the two countries. President Bashir was able to rebrand himself on the back of South Sudan's failures, as was apparent in the manner in which he strengthened Sudan's relationship with the European Union (EU) over migration and made progress towards the lifting of US sanctions. South Sudan's abysmal human rights record provided space for Sudan to downplay the impact of its wars on civilian populations in the peripheries. More recently, Bashir's apparent success at brokering an agreement in the HLRF offered him the opportunity to portray himself as a statesman and to distance himself from his persona of authoritarian dictator.

With the establishment of the Sovereignty Council of Sudan – a civil-military transitional administration that will govern Sudan for 39 months at which point elections will be held in which the members of the Sovereignty Council are ineligible to contest – and the deadline for the establishment of a new transitional government in South Sudan less than two weeks away, both countries are grappling with incomplete transitions and uncertain futures. The key question that lies ahead is whether the Sudans will remain trapped in cycles of military takeovers or whether they can manage to sustain a process of democratic transformation. Of the two, the political environment in Sudan may be in a greater state of flux given the major changes to the balance of power that have taken place over the past year. However, this uncertainty also carries with it an opportunity to chart a new course if a civilian-led government is able to establish itself.

It may be noteworthy, in this regard, that the two most prominent political figures in the country – Abdalla Hamdok, the Prime Minister, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, generally referred to as Hemedti, who was Deputy Head of the Transitional Military Council and currently serves as a member of the Sovereign Council – are both from the peripheries of Sudan (Western Kordofan and Darfur, respectively). The history of marginalization and neglect that people from the peripheries of Sudan share with South Sudanese may offer entry points for strengthened relationships between Khartoum and Juba.

The worst-case scenario would see Sudan collapse under the weight of its political struggle. Such an outcome would be disastrous for both countries. If Sudan were to implode and different militia leaders came to control parts of the pipeline to the Red Sea, it would result in exorbitant transaction costs for South Sudan to export its oil. The breakdown of government in Sudan would also trigger a flow of returnees and a potential influx of arms into South Sudan, while it is still gripped by insecurity and humanitarian crisis. At a regional level, Sudan's collapse could exacerbate tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia, contributing to the regionalization of the conflict.

The Influence of Neighbours and Regional Bodies in South Sudan

The East and Horn of Africa region has played a central role in decision-making about peace and security in South Sudan since the start of the conflict. South Sudan's neighbours, particularly the four 'frontline countries' of Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda, have strong interests in South Sudan and have carefully guarded their control over the peace process. Complicating the picture is the manner in which the interests of powerful individuals in neighbouring countries, particularly senior military or intelligence officers or individuals with commercial clout, become conflated with their national interest to the extent where it is often difficult to separate the two.

South Sudan has the reputation regionally for being a cash-rich country but also a very risky place to do business. As a result, it tends to attract individuals that are interested in short-term deal-making, which is familiar terrain for regional elites. Each of the neighbouring countries has its own way of viewing its interests in South Sudan. For Kenyan politicians, rumoured cash pay outs from South Sudan help them in manoeuvring their own political contests. President Museveni and his inner circle have benefited financially from the Ugandan army's intervention in

South Sudan. Ethiopia has tried to portray itself as a stabilizing force in the region, but Prime Minister Abiy has been less keen to assume responsibility for the situation than his predecessor.

Another dimension of regional perspectives on South Sudan is the role that borders play in defining the way countries and their people interact with one another. Many communities straddle borders or seasonally migrate back and forth, which allows people along the borders to benefit from access to multiple countries. However, the porous borders also enable the movement of armed groups, smuggling, and vast ungoverned regions that can be exploited by criminals and armed insurgencies. This dynamic is particularly prominent in South Sudan's relationship with countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR).

Regional bodies are largely captured by the same transactional politics that characterize bilateral relationships with South Sudan. The manner in which individual leaders dominate decision-making in regional bodies was apparent in the shift of the peace talks from Addis Ababa to Khartoum and the marginal role that the IGAD Special Envoy played in the final stages of the High Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF). The process also became less transparent, less institutionalized, and more reflective of Sudan's bilateral interests. The talks in Khartoum also demonstrated the limited ability that Western donors have to influence the outcome of the process, when set against the interests of regional elites.

These criticisms notwithstanding, regional bodies do provide a circumscribed role for norms, principles, and institutions, which can be leveraged in various ways by civic actors. South Sudan's entrance into the East African Community (EAC), for example, provides an opportunity to challenge the Government of South Sudan on its human rights record, as can be seen in complaints filed against the government of South Sudan in the East African Court of Justice (EACJ), including over the arbitrary arrest and detention of businessman Kerubino Agok Wol. The interests of South Sudan's neighbours are also more diffuse at the level of the African Union (AU), which has allowed the AU to make some more positive contributions, such as the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan (AUCISS). The AU can also play an important role in the transitional justice program described in the R-ARCSS, particularly as it relates to the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS).

The AU, however, has largely played the role of a junior partner to IGAD in South Sudan. This contrasts with the AU's more prominent role during the political transition in Sudan, where the AU Peace and Security Council (AUPSC) set a deadline for a handover to civilian rule; then suspended Sudan when the military cut off negotiations and violently dispersed protesters. The nature of the political transition in Sudan, where the civilian 'Forces for Freedom and Change' played such a key role, also enabled the AU to devote more attention to unarmed sectors of society. This stands in contrast to the peace talks in South Sudan where a party's voice is directly proportional to their capacity to wield violence, and where the AU has not treated the country within the framework of a transition to democracy. Another contrasting example can be seen in the AU's role in CAR, where a tripartite mediation structure consisting of a lead mediator from the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and two other mediators from the AU and UN was tasked with mediating a resolution to the crisis.

The Middle East's Spreading Influence in South Sudan

One dynamic of the conflict in South Sudan that has broader implications at the regional and continental level is the influence of Middle Eastern states. Due to a confluence of factors including commercial, security and political interests, the three Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar) have emerged as influential players in South Sudan. Commercial investments from Middle Eastern countries serve as a hedge for future business prospects in sectors such as agriculture, water and tourism. Their political interests in South Sudan are refracted through concerns relating to their more immediate priority countries, including Sudan and Egypt. Other considerations include the role of the Muslim Brothers, the war in Yemen, and the security of the Red Sea. Meanwhile, these states' highly visible interest in the Horn of Africa is spurring a backlash from Uganda and Kenya, whose leadership are fearful that they could become pawns in other countries' power games.

One way in which the GCC States may be emboldening the political leadership in South Sudan is through direct financial assistance. As South Sudan assumes more and more financial risk through the future sale of oil, countries such as Qatar and UAE have proved willing to step in and provide financial support when money runs out. It is difficult to determine the terms of loans, due to a lack of transparency, but the government's propensity to spend any money it has available to it suggests that these deals will likely handicap the country economically for many years to come. Support from the Gulf states enables the government to secure enough income to procure weapons and sustain its patronage networks. This in turn makes the political leadership less willing to compromise in the context of the political process. The support of the Arab world also emboldens the political leadership in South Sudan to thwart justice, as can be seen in Egypt's resistance to the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS) and its shielding of South Sudan during its time as chair of the AU.

The influence that Middle Eastern states have in South Sudan and the broader Horn of Africa region should be of concern to the AU. The main players in the Middle East are dominated by the logic of the political marketplace and are not committed to the norms and principles of multilateralism. If the AU allows its member states to deal with the Middle East in a piecemeal fashion that does not prioritize the collective interests of African states, it could provoke a race to the bottom with unpredictable consequences. South Sudan is especially vulnerable in bargains with Middle Eastern actors. As panel members observed, there is good reason for concern that the Government of South Sudan is 'mortgaging the country to external powers' and to anticipate further pressure on civic actors as a result: 'support from the Middle East has only elevated the chance of the military being seen as the solution.'⁶ To counteract this influence, the AU should work proactively to develop an external action policy that provides a framework for more coordinated and constructive engagement between the Horn of Africa and GCC states.

Concluding Remarks

As the conflict in South Sudan drags on into its seventh year, policymakers must be attentive to the political influences and interests of neighbouring and Middle Eastern states and their implications for efforts to protect civilians and secure a lasting political settlement. Political instability in Sudan and Ethiopia has made the region more unpredictable, but the political flux has also created opportunities for democratic reform and transition away from authoritarian rule that could have a positive influence in South Sudan. Amplifying the voices of civilians at the grassroots; promoting more institutionalized responses; and prioritizing the collective good over narrow self-interest will be critical if the region is to chart a path towards consolidated peace.

In support of this agenda, the CRP South Sudan Panel indicates the need for further research into:

- Histories and practices of non-violence in South Sudan, including exploring whether and how particular social structures, labor movements, institutions, laws and conceptions of basic rights either limit, or can facilitate, non-violent action.
- The interests of neighbors in either war or peace in South Sudan, to examine the similarities and differences between existing policies and the perspectives of policy elites in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Sudan, including on questions of trade, refugees and security.
- The ambiguities of South Sudan's relationship with the Middle East both at social and political levels. How do the interests of Middle Eastern actors vary? How do South Sudanese elites and ordinary people perceive the opportunities and risks of engagement with the Middle East? How do historical and contemporary experiences of racial discrimination shape their perceptions? To what extent are Middle Eastern actors attentive to these experiences?

⁶ Comments from individual panel members, 2 July 2019.

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