

# South Sudan: The Bumpy Road to Democratic Transition

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The trajectory of democratic transition in Africa has been marred by optimism in the post-cold war period, but it has taken a new turn in recent years with surge in autocracies and a remarkable resurgence of abrupt unconstitutional seizures of power in recent years in sub-Saharan Africa. This is well manifested in the Horn of Africa, as the process of democratic transition has largely retrogressed and stalled at the best, particularly in the case of South Sudan. Despite this bumpy road to democratic transition, there is a dearth of understanding of the drivers stalling democratic transition in South Sudan. This necessitates a better analysis of these drivers and to put South Sudan on a sustainable path toward democratic transition. This paper is an attempt to provide evidence-driven understanding of democratic transitions in South Sudan. The paper adopts a multidisciplinary framework of various theoretical approaches for analyzing the democratic transition in South Sudan. Based on hybrid research methods and a thorough analysis that is grounded on the political economy approach, the paper shows that the path toward democratic transitions in South Sudan has been constrained by a web of intertwined political, economic, and security challenges that inhibit the conduct of the first general elections in the youngest country of South Sudan. Some of these challenges include the fallacy of power-sharing peace agreement, kleptocratic economic governance, and politicized and ethnicized security sector. As a microcosm of the Horn of Africa, the case study of South Sudan provides some implications and practical recommendations for governing better the democratic transitions in the region. Some of these recommendations include adoption of a realistic and regionally-centered mediation strategy, considering other options beyond power-sharing formula for managing the post-conflict political transitions, considering more credible sunset clause besides the conduct of elections for ending the political transitions, and more involvement of civil society in all phases of peace agreements, particularly the monitoring and oversight mechanisms.

*Keywords:* democracy, transition, elections, autocracy, political economy, South Sudan, Horn of Africa

## Introduction

The history of political transition in South Sudan is marred by turbulent and acrimonious phases. Even the transition to statehood in 2011 was tainted by the eruption of ruinous civil wars. In addition, the peace agreements

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signed in 2015 and 2018 to end respectively the first (2013-2015) and second (2016-2018) civil wars and to put the new nation on the path to democratic transitions with the conduct of general elections have not been implemented with elections postponed several times. This repetitive postponement of elections has caused transition fatigue and ramped up violent conflicts and communal tensions (Demissie, 2025). This derailed democratic transition underscores the challenges of governing political transition in South Sudan and creates a dilemma of democratic transition and legitimacy in the youngest nation.

South Sudan has attracted adequate research on its political and legitimacy crisis. However, there is limited research on understanding the anatomy of governing political transitions in South Sudan. This paper is an attempt to contribute to filling this gap by providing a deeper understanding of the challenges of political transitions in South Sudan through systematic analysis and examination of the governance of political and democratic transition in South Sudan. The main objective of this paper is to assess the process of stalled democratic transition in South Sudan since 2018 after the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) with the aim of identifying gaps, understanding the factors responsible and providing feasible policy recommendations for advancing democratic transitions in South Sudan.

The paper is organized into this introduction section, followed by definition of key concepts, and presentation of research approach and theoretical framework in Section 2. A brief description of the context is presented in Section 3, followed by succinct account of the history of political transitions including transition to statehood in Section 4. Efforts of democratic transition since 2018 are examined, assessed, and analyzed in Section 5, then followed by sharing some regional implications and actionable recommendations in Section 6. The paper ends with conclusions in Section 7.

## **Concepts, Research Approach, and Theoretical Framework**

### **Concepts: Transition, Political Transition, and Democratic Transition**

As the key concepts such as transition, political transition and democratic transition are central in guiding the assessment and examination of the governance of political transitions in South Sudan, the following simple definitions of these concepts are provided for clarity:

**Transition:** The concept of “*transition*” in this paper refers generally to a change in political regime from authoritarianism to democracy or from democracy to authoritarianism (Huntington, 1991, p. 17).

**Political transition:** The concept of “*political transition*” is an interval between one political regime and another or it is a political transformation from one form of government to another form of government, which typically arises from warfare and internal social conflict (Lichie, 2021, p. 1; Lenarchard, 1994).

**Democratic transition:** The concept of “*democratic transition*” refers to the critical step in the history of democracy when a country passes a threshold marked by the introduction of competitive elections with mass suffrage for the main political offices in the land (Mazzuca & Munck, 2021, p. 3425). In other words, democratic transition is a political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The concepts of political transition and democratic transition are used interchangeably in this paper.

**Modalities of political transitions:** Political transition can occur through any of the three modalities of change: *reform* initiated by existing authoritarian regime, *compromise* between the existing authoritarian regime and opposition, and *overthrow* or coup by the opposition (Lichie, 2021, pp. 2-3). In the case of South Sudan, most historical transitions are characterized by coercive change through occupation and colonization, while the recent transitions are shaped by compromise through peace agreements.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concept of political transition is a complex system that requires a multidisciplinary approach to understand it and assess it. There are a number of theoretical frameworks advanced to analyze the phenomenon of political transition. These frameworks are generally grouped into the following theoretical approaches:

**Structure-oriented approach:** This approach is anchored to the theory of modernization as a determinant of transition outcome. The main assumption of this approach is that economic development, political culture, class conflict, social structures, and other social conditions can explain particular outcome of transition (Lichie, 2021). While this approach focuses on socio-economic and cultural conditions as the determinants of the outcomes of democratic transition, these conditions are not sufficient by themselves to explain and sustain such outcomes as these structural conditions are shaped and created by the political governance. However, this approach is relevant in the context of South Sudan to understand better the role of socio-economic conditions in advancing democratic transition.

**Process-oriented or strategic choice approach:** The main argument of this approach is that the success or failure of democratic transition is the outcome of the deliberate elite strategic choices. The main assumption of this approach is that elite calculations, strategic choices, and the interaction between choices were viewed as decisive in determining political outcomes (Linz & Stepan, 1978). In addition, this approach prioritizes the process of transition rather than structural conditions with focus on democratic crafting involving negotiated agreements between ruling elites and opposition elites that moved common perceptions of self-interest toward accepting democracy as the best possible regime (Lichie, 2021; Linz & Stepan, 1996). However, the process of transition and structural conditions are equally important in advancing democratic transition. This approach complements the structure-oriented approach, and it is relevant to the context of South Sudan in understanding the role of the process of transition and the negotiated agreements such as the R-ARCSS in facilitating the transition process.

**Institutional context-oriented approach:** This approach emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping structural conditions and elites strategic choices towards facilitating democratic transition. The main assumption of this approach is that the way the regime is institutionalized is the key determinant of the variation in regime transition (O'Neil, 1996). This approach emphasizes the changes in state-society relations and the role of civil society as critical in democratic political transition (Lichie, 2021). This approach is also an attempt to bridge the gap between the structural and strategic choice approaches by emphasizing the way regime is institutionalized as the key explanatory variable for the variations in transition (Lichie, 2021, p. 29). As this approach underscores the role of democratic institutions in shaping the actors in the transition process, it is so relevant to the context of South Sudan to understand the role of democratic institutions, judiciary, civil society, leadership, and opposition political parties in advancing or thwarting the democratic transition in the country.

**Political economy approach:** This approach emphasizes the sequencing of political and economic reforms and the interplay between politics and economy as the explanatory variables determining variations in transition outcome (Lichie, 2021, pp. 25-31; Sujian, 1999, p. 134). One key assumption of this approach is the correlation between the economic crises and regime change, as failure to overcome economic crises and manage the resulting distributive conflicts would increase the probability of the old regime being transformed; similarly, successful adjustment to economic crises and improvements of economic performance would increase the prospects for democratic consolidation (Haggard & Kaufman, 1995). The main argument of this approach is that pursuing

economic reforms at the expense of political democratization would not guarantee that authoritarian elites would choose to carry through with political democratization as successful economic reforms might accentuate the regime dictatorship (Lichie, 2021). In other words investing in the basic infrastructure for institutionalizing democracy is a pre-requisite for sustainable economic reforms and shaping the elites strategic choices towards sustained democratic political transition and consolidation.

While these theoretical approaches are relevant to understand the governance of political transitions in South Sudan, the political economy approach is more comprehensive as it captures all aspects of the other three approaches. What is missing is the role of security governance in democratic transition. This approach is expanded to include security as a critical element in determining the democratic transition outcome. The critical role of security sector in governing democratic transition has been neglected in the literature of democratic transition (Kuol, 2025a). This nexus between security, development and governance was well articulated by the then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, by stating that “We will not enjoy security without development, we will not enjoy development without security, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights and the rule of law” (UN, 2005). This emphasizes the interconnectedness of these three areas and highlights that development and security are not separate but intertwined, with good governance acting as the bridge. These three elements: development, security and governance, are critical not only for governing democratic transition but they are key determinants of the outcome of any democratic transition.

The conflict sensitivity framework (CSRF, 2017): In addition to the aforementioned approaches, conflict sensitivity framework is used to provide the basis and methodological approach for analyzing and understanding the structural challenges facing democratic transition in South Sudan. Conflict sensitivity is defined as understanding the context in which you are operating, understanding the interaction between your engagement and the context, and taking action to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict and stability (CSRF, 2017, p. 5). This framework was introduced to help humanitarian actors do no harm with their humanitarian interventions by understanding the conflict context. Based on a large body of research and analysis exists on South Sudan’s conflicts, three levels of conflict have been identified as the key feature of South Sudan’s conflict dynamics and the backbone of any conflict analysis and conflict-sensitive engagements in future (CSRF, 2017). These levels and types of conflict are elite political-military competition over the state, citizen-state conflict, and community conflicts over resources and are interlinked. This framework was later used to provide an evidence-informed common narrative of the context of South Sudan through analysis of three context pillars: socio-economic pillar, security pillar and governance pillar within the evolving regional and international challenges and overarching climate and environmental change. This framework captures the aspects of the aforementioned approaches for democratic political transition and in addition of security that is missing in the four approaches. It is also consistent with the development-security-governance nexus framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness of these three domains, positing that progress in one area is essential for advancement in the others, and that a holistic approach is needed to achieve sustainable peace and development (Delaila & Zondi, 2020).

### **Research Approach**

As South Sudan is characterized by many transitions, the focus of this study will be on examining and assessing the stalled democratic transition provided for in the 2018 Peace Agreement. This study is based on hybrid methods of secondary data from a desk review of relevant literature and primary data from key informant

interviews. More than 30 key informant interviews were conducted in person and virtually. These key informants included senior policy makers in the government, opposition political leaders, civil society leaders, academia, think tanks as well as experts from United Nations (UN) agencies, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The interviews were semi-structured interviews and guided by a check list of open-ended questions. Some of the main guiding questions and checklists for such interviews included:

- How optimistic are you that the first elections will be held by December 2026?
- If elections are not conducted as scheduled, what are the most important factors that will derail the conduct of the first elections in South Sudan?
- What do you think could be done differently to ensure that the first elections are held in South Sudan?

In addition, ethnographic approach was used by closely observing and monitoring the political, socio-economic, and security events as well as having regular interactions over years with relevant policy makers, experts, and opinion leaders in South Sudan.

### **The Context: Governance, Security and Development Features**

The main features of the context of South Sudan are provided within the following socio-cultural perspective and the governance-development-security nexus.

#### **Socio-Cultural Features**

The nascent nation South Sudan has a richly diverse ethnic communities with 64 tribes or ethnic groups and which sometimes are grouped into 80 distinct peoples (Joshua Project, 2025). Many of these communities share common culture with very closely-linked cultural traits and intelligible languages which form distinct larger family units. These communities are also broadly grouped into three ethnic grouping: Nilo-Sudanic tribes, Nilo Hamiets tribes, and Bantu and which are also divided into Eastern Sudanic, Central Sudanic, and Ubangian (Embassy of South Sudan to Norway, 2025). Eastern and Central Sudanic are subset of Nilo-Saharan languages which constitute the major language family in South Sudan. Ubangian is mostly associated with Bantu people who are the second major language family in South Sudan. The major ethnic communities in South Sudan are *Dinka (Jieng)* from Nilo-Sudanic tribes, the largest ethnic group, followed by *Nuer (Naath)* from Nilo-Sudanic tribes, the *Zande (Azande Kingdom)*, from Bantu ethnic groups, then the Bari from Nilo Hamiets tribes, and other ethnic groups such the *Shilluk (Chollo)* as the major Lou Nilotic group, and *Latuka (Otuho)* from the *Nilo Hamiets* tribes.

Each of these different ethnic groups in South Sudan has a long history of customs and traditions. Despite a decades-long attempt by the northern-based national government of Sudan to “Arabize and Islamize” the southern region in the 20th century, a rich cultural diversity still exists in South Sudan (Collins & Sabr, 2025). During the years of civil wars against misrule and marginalization by the ruling elites in North Sudan, the people of South Sudan developed among themselves a strong feeling of solidarity, bond, and unity around their African identity and the shared suffering under the various regimes in Sudan. However, after the independence of South Sudan and the eruption of the two civil wars in 2013 and 2016, there is a growing strong feeling among people of South Sudan to affiliate more with their tribe or ethnic groups than their affiliation with the sovereign state of South Sudan (Kuol & Oringa, 2021, p. 22; Kuol, 2019a).

The overwhelming majority of the population of South Sudan is living in rural areas. The recent nationwide survey estimated the population of South Sudan to be about 12.44 million with 52.9% females and 47.1% males

(NBS, 2023). The survey indicates that South Sudan has a young population of 70.6% under age 30 years old, while the working age population is estimated to be about 52.2% and the non-working age population is about 47.7%. The level of forced displacement in South Sudan remains one of the significant crisis in Africa with 2.3 million of its citizens being refugees and asylum-seekers in neighboring countries and a further 2 million South Sudanese internally displaced within the country largely due to conflict or natural disasters (UNHCR, 2025). It is estimated that 80% of the population in South Sudan lives below the national poverty line, making the country one of the poorest in the world and with near absence of public service delivery (World Bank, 2025b).

### **The Economic Features**

The mainstay of the economy of South Sudan is subsistence crop farming. The recent nationwide survey shows that subsistence crop farming, subsistence animal husbandry and fishing constitute about 75% of the sources of livelihood (NBS, 2023). South Sudan holds one of the richest and most fertile agriculture areas in Africa with an estimated 33 million acres of prime arable land, but only 4% is currently being cultivated (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, 2025). Besides agricultural potentials, South Sudan has abundant livestock with its population estimated at 36.2 million animals comprised of 11.7 million cattle, 12.4 million goats, and 12.1 million sheep with estimated asset value of 2.2 billion dollars (World Bank, 2023).

In addition, South Sudan is well-endowed with abundant water resources with about 90% of South Sudan situated in the Nile Basin, and about 20% of the Nile Basin found in South Sudan and about 28% of the flow of the Nile River crosses South Sudan into northern Sudan and Egypt (Salman, 2011). Also, South Sudan has enormous ecological wealth and boasts a remarkable array of wildlife and ecosystems with numerous species of flora and fauna, making it a critical center for global biodiversity and is also renowned for hosting the world's second-largest terrestrial mammal migration (BioDB, 2025).

Importantly, the oil sector plays an important role in the economy of South Sudan. The country has enormous oil reserves estimated at 3.5 billion barrels and is producing an average of approximately 149,000 barrels per day, making it the third-largest reserve in sub-Saharan Africa, after Nigeria and Angola (African Business, 2024). As most of the oil of South Sudan is exported to the international market through Sudan, the eruption in 2023 of the brutal civil war in Sudan has disrupted the oil exports of South Sudan. Besides oil reserves, South Sudan is rich with metallic minerals spreading all over the South Sudan: gold, copper, zinc, lead, manganese, iron, silver, and tin as well as industrial minerals such as marble, limestone, dolomite, kaolin, clay, and asbestos (Ministry of Mining, 2025).

Despite these enormous potentials, the total value of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in current prices in South Sudan was estimated at about 5.42 billion U.S. dollars in 2024 (O'Neill, 2025). Since the independence of South Sudan, the GDP has been contracting almost four times from 17.34 billion U.S. dollars in 2011 to 4.42 billion U.S. dollars in 2024.

As shown in the figure below, the goods produced from the agriculture sector in 2012 were extremely low (4.1%), while the industry sector mainly oil and mining dominated the GDP with 56.8%, followed by the services sector (39.1%). The economy of South Sudan is so reliant on the oil sector making it one of the most oil-dependent countries in the world, covering 98% of the government's annual operating budget. The eruption of war between South Sudan and Sudan in 2012 over dispute on *Heglig (Panthou)*, the oil-rich border area between the two countries, and the eruption of first civil wars in 2013 and 2016 coupled with rampant corruption in South Sudan (Transparency International, 2024), the share of the oil and mining sector decreased considerable to 41.6%, while

the share of the services sector increased considerably to 52.5% as well as the share of the agriculture sector increased to 6%. This neglect of the agriculture sector, the eruption of civil wars, and the rampant corruption experienced by South Sudan are typical manifestations of the “oil curse” phenomenon.

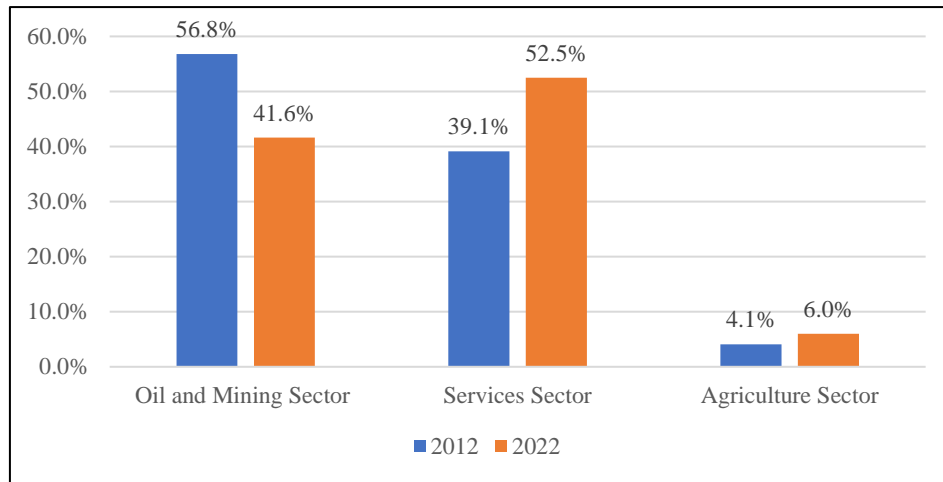


Figure 1. Gross Domestic Product: Composition and share (%) of sectors. Source: Data from NBS (2022).

### Security Features

The features of the security sector in South Sudan are largely shaped by history, particularly the history of armed struggle and the peace agreements. In particular, the 2005 Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that was signed by the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), the military wing of the SPLM, has laid the current security infrastructure for South Sudan. The CPA granted the SPLM to establish with its military wing, the SPLA, the security sector in South Sudan during the six-year transitional period.

The SPLA was recognized by the CPA as a national army besides the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and to be in control of the Southern Sudan region. In addition, the SPLM-led transitional government of Southern Sudan was entrusted to establish police service, prisons service, fire-brigade service, wildlife service, and Southern Sudan judiciary as per provisions of the 2005 Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan (ICSS). Besides having the SPLA as a regional national army, the SPLM staffed all security agencies and institutions with poorly trained and inexperienced non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and officers of the SPLA (Kuol, 2019a).

This militarization of the security sector was exacerbated by the 2006 Juba Declaration that provided for the integration into the SPLA, the Southern Sudan Defense Forces (SSDF), and the previously hostile militias used by the Sudan Armed Forces as part of its counterinsurgency warfare against the SPLA (Government of Southern Sudan, 2006). This declaration gave the SPLM-led government the leverage to scale up the buying-off and absorption of military and political opposition which fundamentally undermined efforts for security sector reform and fueled rivalry and division within the SPLA and resulted in inflation of military ranks (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017, p. 9). Some described this phenomenon as “military aristocracy” (Pinaud, 2014) to refer to the emergence of dominant class known as the “gun class” (D’Agoot, 2018). With the independence of South Sudan in 2011, the division and rivalry within the security sector further exacerbated and contributed among other factors to the eruption of the first and second civil wars. In 2017, the SPLA in the process of restructuring changed its name to South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) (Radio Tamazuj, 2017).

### **Political Features**

South Sudan became independent in 2011 making it the youngest country in the world. This hard-won independence came after a long political and armed struggle in two civil wars, 1955-1972 and 1983-2005. Even before the independence of Sudan in 1956, the people of Southern Sudan demanded self-rule and autonomy to protect their African cultures and identity from the Arab and Islamic dominated Northern Sudan. The two civil wars caused many lives and massive displacement: internally and in neighboring countries. The first civil war ended after 17 years of civil war with the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement (AAPA) that granted the people of Southern Sudan self-rule with an autonomous regional government within united Sudan. However, the AAPA did not survive as it was abrogated in 1983 by the Government of Sudan after imposing Islamic sharia laws in the country.

The second civil, 1983-2005, was also concluded with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 (IGAD, 2005). The CPA granted the people of Southern Sudan not only their autonomous regional government status but also the right to self-determination referendum to decide either to remain within the united Sudan or to secede from Sudan. During the period leading to the referendum, the regional Government of Southern Sudan was governed by an Interim Constitution (Government of Sudan, 2005) with semi decentralized federal system having three tiers of government: national, ten states, and local government (Kuol, 2025b). The referendum was conducted as scheduled in 2011 and resulted in astounding majority (98.83%) of people of South Sudan voting for separation (The Carter Center, 2011) and South Sudan became an independent country on July 9, 2011.

The Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan (Government of South Sudan, 2011) was promulgated in 2011 to govern the youngest country during its transition to statehood (Government of South Sudan, 2011). The TCSS, 2011 made South Sudan a republic and provided for the three branches of government: the executive headed by the President of the Republic with four-year term, a bicameral legislature; the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) and Council of States headed by speakers with four-year terms for all members of the national legislature; and the Judiciary, headed by the President of the Supreme Court, the highest court in the country. The TCSS, 2011 also provided for, as in the ICSS, 2005, a decentralized system of governance with three tiers of government: national, ten states, and local government at the county level.

Unfortunately, in less than three years, the youngest nation slid into its first civil war in 2013 and then followed by the second civil war in 2016. The first civil war, 2013-2015, ended in 2015 by the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). However, this Agreement did not survive one year as the second civil erupted in 2016. The second civil war, 2016-2018, was resolved in 2018 by the Revitalized-Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) that was also mediated by IGAD (2018).

The R-ARCSS provided for the establishment of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), preparation of the permanent constitution, various reforms in governance, justice sector, security sector, economy, particularly the oil sector, and the conduct in 2022 of general elections towards the end of the four-year transitional period of the R-ARCSS. Since then, no elections have been held as they were postponed several times and are now scheduled to be conducted towards the end of 2026.

### **The Genesis of Political Transitions in South Sudan**

According to archaeological evidence, the ancient history of South Sudan as part of the history of Sudan can be traced to Paleolithic era (Omer, 2009). Prior to the arrival of the colonial authorities in South Sudan, the

various communities of South Sudan witnessed considerable migration that was accompanied by acrimonious and bitter process of forming alliance or confederation between and among various communities before they permanently settled as distinct ethnic groups in their current territories. The socio-political systems and structures adopted by various ethnic groups in the pre-colonial period involved centralized political authority, represented by Shilluk (Chollo) and Azandi, and non-centralized political authority, represented by Dinka and Nuer (Omer, 2009).

The customary authorities sometimes refer to traditional authorities, traditional institutions and sometimes termed as chiefs are critical for understanding how the communities of South Sudan govern themselves through their customs, traditions, values, and norms. The institution of customary authority is almost in all African countries but in different forms with its structures commonly framed around the institution of traditional leadership that involves a hierarchical structure of rulers like kings, chiefs, headmen, and village heads, with power and authority varying across different systems and evolving over time due to colonization and modernization (de Visser & Chigwata, 2025). In South Sudan, the traditional authority is defined as “the traditional community body with definite traditional administrative jurisdiction within which customary powers are exercised by traditional leaders on behalf of the community” (Republic of South Sudan, 2009, p. 4). The traditional institutions and systems had managed not only to maintain peaceful coexistence, tranquility and social cohesion but also nurture common identity around their distinct cultures and customs.

These traditional institutions and systems have been weakened by various political transitions experienced by the people of South Sudan. Some of the notable transitions in the political history of South Sudan include the Turco-Egyptian regime, the Mahdiyya regime, the Anglo-Egyptian rule, the transition to independence of Sudan, the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace agreement, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and the transition to statehood in South Sudan. Each of these transitions is briefly presented in terms of drivers, incentives, and actors, including non-state actors.

### **The Turco-Egyptian Regime (1821-1881): The Onset of Political Transition**

The Turco-Egyptian regime invaded Sudan in 1821, and imposed militaristic system of government as the most effective way of mobilizing slaves and ivory from South Sudan (Teny-Dhurgon, 1995). This invasion of Sudan had a profound impact on the African ethnic groups and their traditional systems of government and changed the local balance of power in favor of Arab ethnic groups. During this period, the Turco-Egyptian authorities and private traders from northern Sudan undertook slave raids on a considerable scale into what is today South Sudan. The Arab nomads sponsored by the new regime became so engaged in massive raiding of African ethnic communities in Sudan including South Sudan for slaves and cattle and established al-Zubayr Pash's slave trading empire in Bahr el Ghazal region in South Sudan (Lane & Johnson, 2009).

These slave raids by the Turco-Egyptian regime and Arab nomads had profoundly affected the prevailing system of traditional authorities in South Sudan. This transition period was characterized by lawlessness, anarchy, and slavery that resulted in famine on a huge scale and massive displacement in southern Sudan (Keen, 1994). By the early 1880s, almost two-thirds of the population of Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan, was estimated to be slaves from the African ethnic communities in Southern Sudan, Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile (Spaulding, 1982). Some ethnic communities resisted such raids by strengthening their traditional institutions while others were submissive and therefore succumbed to and became part of the new regime.

**The Mahdiyya Regime (1881-1898): Continuation of Anarchy and Lawlessness**

The Turco-Egyptian regime was defeated by the Mahdiyya regime in 1881 with full support from the slave traders, particularly Arab nomads of Kordofan and Darfur in Central and Western Sudan (Keen, 1994; Holt & Daly, 1982). This transition was characterized by chaos, anarchy, and scaling up of unprecedented raiding of slaves and livestock in Southern Sudan, particularly in the Bahr el Ghazal region. In 1884, the Mahdiyya regime invaded the Bahr el Ghazal region of Southern Sudan with support from various groups having interest in slave raids, particularly the Arab nomads of Western Sudan who took the chance to acquire substantial booty (Keen, 1994). Unlike the Turco-Egyptian regime period when there were limited efforts to convert people of Southern Sudan to Islam, the Mahdiyya regime had a clear agenda of spreading Islam in Southern Sudan. The way the Mahdiyya regime wanted to spread Islam and Arabism in Southern Sudan through barbaric slave raids with support by the Arab nomads left behind complex scars expressed in bitter Arab-African inter-identity relations that plagued Sudan (Deng, 2008).

**The Anglo-Egyptian Regime (1898-1956): The Restoration of Native Administration**

The Mahdiyya regime was defeated in 1898 by the Anglo-Egyptian regime which came with a policy of suppressing slavery, at least in theory (Keen, 1994). Although the administration of Southern Sudan was not a priority for the new regime, it adopted a system of government based on indirect rule through “native administration” by using local customary structures and law (Johnson, 2012). The attempt in the early 1900s by the new regime to finance its administrative expenditure in southern Sudan through forced labor and heavy livestock taxes was resisted by people of southern Sudan (Collins, 1971). This resistance was not only harshly quelled, but also led the new regime to soften its commitment to suppress slavery by accommodating and entertaining Arab slave raids in southern Sudan (Henderson, 1939).

In order to appease the people of southern Sudan and to ensure their protection from Arab slave raids, the new regime then formulated the native administration into the Southern Sudan Policy of 1930. The main aim of this policy was to protect the people of southern Sudan from slavery, Islamization, and Arabization from Northern Sudan and to build a series of traditional self-rule based on indigenous customs and beliefs that promoted equity and adherence to the rule of law (Henderson, 1939, p. 165). This policy was instrumental in restoring and protecting the systems and institutions of traditional authorities in Southern Sudan. Despite its success in suppressing slavery and strengthening institutions of traditional authorities, the British colonial regime focused its development efforts on northern Sudan and did not invest in southern Sudan that was left to the Christian missionaries to provide social services such as education.

This policy created uneven development between Northern and Southern Sudan and planted the seed of social, economic, and political disparities. The drastic decision of the British colonial administration to annex Southern Sudan to northern Sudan instead of its initial policy of preparing Southern Sudan to be annexed to Eastern Africa created a country with immense social, economic, and political disparities. Prior to the independence of Sudan in 1956, the Torit Mutiny in Southern Sudan occurred in 1955 and resulted in the first Sudanese civil war (1955-1972). This first civil war was primarily attributed to the decision of the British colonial authorities for falsely forging the united Sudan after pursuing a pattern of development during the colonial period that created inequalities and left the south both absolutely and relatively disadvantaged (Deng, 1995). It was also a manifestation of the dissatisfaction with the way the Anglo-Egyptian regime marginalized Southern Sudanese in the process of transition to the independence of Sudan in 1956.

**Sudan Post-Independence: A Transition to Arabized and Islamic Regime**

During the negotiation of the Northern Sudanese elites for independence of Sudan with the British colonial regime in the early 1950s, the elites of Southern Sudan wanted the British colonial rule to continue with “Southern Policy” rather than being united with Northern Sudan and to prepare them to join East Africa (the initial British policy towards South Sudan). When such demand was rejected by the northern Sudanese elites, the Southern Sudanese elites demanded federalism as the only way for their self-rule, suppressing calls for secession and preserving unity in the diversity of Sudan after independence. In 1954 in Juba, the people of Southern Sudan were the first to demand for the adoption of federal system as they overwhelmingly voted in favor of federalism in their first pan-Southern Conference (Johnson, 2019).

This quest for federalism was cautiously accepted by the Northern Sudanese ruling elites to give it due consideration after independence in 1956 (Alier, 1990). After independence, the northern ruling elites did not only reject the demand for a federal system but also considered it treason and adopted instead an Arab-Islamic identity as the only way to create a homogenous society in the Sudan. The main objective of the post-independence Northern Sudanese ruling elite was the construction of a united Sudan with Arab-Islamism as the sole determinant means for national unity and citizenship. They saw the religious and cultural diversity of the country as a curse and a threat to unity and Arab-Islamic hegemony and strove to eliminate such diversity (Khalid, 1990).

The new rulers of Sudan consistently focused on dismantling Southern Sudan Policy, which was based on traditional systems of government, and replacing it with Arabization and Islamization policy. Well-established religious, cultural, and educational norms in Southern Sudan were eroded during the early years of independence as a number of steps were taken to Islamize and Arabize cultural life and the system of government in Southern Sudan (Alier, 1990). This transition caused enormous disruption in the system of government and traditional institutions in Southern Sudan.

For Southern Sudanese, the independence brokered between the British colonial regime and the northern elite was a mere changing of faces of colonial power from the British to Arabized northerners (Deng, 1995, p. 13). At independence of Sudan, the Southern Sudan was not only negligibly represented in the post-independence national government but also the administration of Southern Sudan was virtually handed over to the Northern Sudanese and with limited access to basic services (Oduho & Deng, 1962, p. 46).

**The 1972 Peace Agreement: A Transition to a Short-Lived Self-Rule**

As mentioned earlier, the first Sudanese civil war (1955-1972) was ended by the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement. This Agreement granted the people of Southern Sudan regional autonomy, known as the Southern Sudan Regional Government, headed by the president of the High Executive Council (HEC). This regional government was granted powers to exercise legislative and executive authority without judicial authority and with decentralized local government system within a united Sudan. The regional government was empowered to elect and remove the president of the High Executive Council, subject to the approval of the president of the Republic of Sudan.

During this transition (1972-1981), the people of Southern Sudan enjoyed relative peace and improved access to basic services. Importantly, the people of South Sudan practiced for the first-time parliamentary democracy with the leadership of regional government changing hands through a relatively free and fair elections. In 1973, the first general elections were conducted in Southern Sudan. Mr. Abel Alier, the interim president of

the HEC appointed in 1972 by the central government, was elected as the first president of the HEC by the elected Southern Sudan Regional Assembly (Malwal, 1985). The second elections were held in 1977 and a new Southern Sudan Regional Assembly was elected. General Joseph Lagu, the former leader of the rebel movement, Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), that signed the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement with the Sudan Government, was elected in 1978 by the newly elected Regional Assembly as the new president of the HEC.

The parliamentary democracy practiced by the people of Southern Sudan outpaced the democratic transition in Northern Sudan and annoyed the central government that became increasingly autocratic. President Nimeiri, the then president of Sudan, seized the opportunity of the reorganization of Northern Sudan into new regions to dissolve in 1980 both the National and Southern Sudan Regional assemblies and called for new elections. The third elections were held in 1980 and Mr. Abel Alier was elected for the second time as the president of the HEC (Lagu, 2006). Despite some challenges and the growing division among Southern Sudanese, this parliamentary democracy created awareness in Southern Sudan about the critical role of mechanisms of checks and balances in advancing democratic system.

This system continued until October 1981 when President Nimeiri of Sudan, after declaring the Islamic Sharia laws, dissolved the Southern Sudan Regional government and appointed new care-taking government to oversee the process of abrogating the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement and re-dividing the Southern Sudan Region into three regions: Bahr el Ghazal, Equatoria, and Upper Nile (Alier, 1990). These decisions ended the 1972 peace agreement and contributed, among other factors, to the eruption of the second civil war in 1983.

#### **The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA): A Transition to Self-determination**

As discussed before, the CPA granted full-pledged powers of a state except foreign relations and national security and intelligence. It came as a result of prolonged negotiations of reconciling competing and incompatible political ideologies of secularism advanced by the SPLM and Islamic state pursued by the Government of Sudan. The CPA provided a compromise of having two systems in one country: namely secularism in Southern Sudan and Islamic state in Northern Sudan. The parties to the CPA agreed to grant the people of Southern Sudan the right of self-determination in a referendum towards the end of a six-year transitional period but both agreed to work together to make the choice of unity rather than secession attractive to the people of Southern Sudan.

Prior to the conduct of the referendum in 2011, population census and general elections in Sudan and Southern Sudan were among the commitments in the CPA to provide the necessary democratic environment and conditions for the conduct of the referendum. The conduct of population census in 2008 was marred by sharp differences between the parties to the CPA as the Government of Sudan refused to include questions related to religion and ethnicity in the census questionnaire. The Government of Sudan feared such information would expose the diversity in Sudan contrary to its Arab-Islamic hegemony agenda. In addition, the conduct of elections in 2010 was the fourth elections for the people of South Sudan to elect their regional government. However, these elections were not seen as credible as they were tainted by high level of intimidation, manipulation, and rigging of elections results largely by security forces in favor of the candidates of the ruling party, the SPLM (Carter Center, 2010, p. 45).

Also, the process towards the conduct of the referendum encountered enormous challenges including the deliberate acts of the Government of Sudan to derail and obstruct the process. It was only the persistence of the SPLM and the pressure of the international community through a credible and in-built Assessment and Evaluation Commission (AEC) in the CPA that made it possible for the referendum to be conducted as per the date set in

the CPA (Reliefweb, 2010).

The people of Southern Sudan were given two choices in the referendum: to confirm the unity of the Sudan by voting to adopt the system of government established under the CPA; or to vote for secession. The overwhelming majority (98.83%) of the people of South Sudan voted for secession in a referendum that was described as credible representation of the will and aspirations of the people of Southern Sudan (Carter Center, 2011, p. 2). The parties to the CPA, particularly the Islamic government of Sudan, failed to make the unity of the Sudan attractive. The Islamic ruling elites felt that the secession of Southern Sudan would allow them to advance their political Islam agenda as they wrongly perceived that Sudan would be more homogenous without Southern Sudan (Kuol, 2020). Also, with the growing feeling in favor of secession, the SPLM did not pursue the agenda of making unity attractive to the people of Southern Sudan but embraced instead the secession and abandoned its New Sudan agenda of establishing a secular Sudan.

### **Post-Independence South Sudan: A Transition to Statehood**

The 2005 Interim Constitution of South Sudan (ICSS) that was based on the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) provided for the people of South Sudan a decentralized and almost federal system of government with the authority of government derived from the will of the people. It provided three tiers of government: Southern Sudan, state (10), and county at the local government level with each state to be governed by its own state interim constitution. To avoid overlapping of powers and roles, the exclusive, concurrent, and residual powers for each tier of government were detailed in the ICSS. As per the interim constitution, members of Southern Sudan Transitional Legislative Assembly, the state transitional assemblies, and the county councils as well as the president of the government of South Sudan, state governors and county commissioners are to be elected with two terms limit of four-year for each term.

The judiciary of Southern Sudan was made independent and headed by the president of the Supreme Court and with justices and judges to be appointed through an independent judicial services commission. To strengthen the decentralized system of government, each state should have its own judiciary, public attorneys, police, and other law enforcement agencies such as prison, fire brigade, and wildlife. In terms of fiscal and financial competence, the ICSS provided detailed sources of revenue to be collected by each level of government. It also provided mechanism of ensuring appropriate sharing and utilization of financial resources through establishment of Fiscal and Financial Allocation and Monitoring Commission (FFAMC) with each state to be represented by its state minister of finance.

This system of decentralized government was guaranteed in the ICSS to be adopted in the post-independent South Sudan. Specifically, Article 208(7) of ICSS made it clear that if the outcome of the referendum favors secession, this constitution (Government of Southern Sudan, 2005) shall remain in force as the constitution of a sovereign and independent Southern Sudan. In other words, the decentralized federal system established during the period of CPA is to continue in the sovereign and independent South Sudan until a permanent constitution is promulgated. Contrary to the provisions of the ICSS, the Transitional Constitution of the independent South Sudan, 2011 (TCSS) regressed unfortunately from the decentralized system of government to autocratic and centralized unitary system. While the TCSS explicitly stated in its Article 1(4) that South Sudan shall be governed on the basis of a decentralized democratic system, there are many of its provisions that clearly favor centralized unitary system of government and are inconsistent with a typical decentralized system.

One glaring departure from federal system is found in Article 3(2) of the TCSS which states that the authority

of the government is derived from the constitution and the law instead of “will of the people” as in ICSS. Deriving the authority of the government only from the constitution and the law is inconsistent with the concept of sovereignty that rests with the people in a typical democratic system. Also the TCSS does not meet some key aspects of any decentralized federal system such as the autonomy and political competence of tiers of government. Unlike the ICSS, the TCSS in its Article 101(r) and (s) gives exceptional powers to the President of South Sudan to remove an elected state governor and/or dissolve state legislature in the event of a crisis in the state that threatens national security.

The irony with this constitutional provision is that such powers are exercised without due process of law and without clear mechanisms upon which such powers could be objectively exercised. On the basis of this constitutional provision, the President of South Sudan has been relieving and appointing state governors without any due process of law. In addition, while ICSS provided clear provisions to have sub-national state judiciary and decentralized public attorneys, police, prisons, wildlife, and fire-brigade services, the TCSS centralized all these services. As such, the state governments are dispossessed of decentralized powers and lack constitutional quality or political competence of decentralized tier of government.

This retreat from the decentralized system of government in the post-independent South Sudan is largely attributed to the exclusive and non-participatory process of promulgating the TCSS (Akol, 2011). This process created a shaky constitutional foundation for the new state of South Sudan with an autocratic unitary system with the President of the Republic granted excessive and absolute powers that undermine checks and balances and core principles of good governance (Kuol, 2020). Besides undermining the federal system as the popular demand of the people of South Sudan (Johnson, 2019), the exclusive process adopted by the post-independence South Sudanese ruling elites for promulgating the new constitution for the new state missed the opportunity of forging a new social contract and adopting federal system of government that would have put the new state on the path of peace, trust, unity, social cohesion, and sustainable democratic transition (Kuol, 2019a). This marked a bad start for the new state of South Sudan, as it was founded on a fragile constitution that lacks legitimacy and buy-in from the people of South Sudan.

This transitional process to statehood created a widespread sense of exclusion that is reminiscent of the feeling of exclusion during the transition to the independence of Sudan that resulted eventually in the people of South Sudan to secede from Sudan (Jok, 2011). Apparently, the post-independence ruling elites of South Sudan followed the footpaths of the post-independence Northern Sudanese ruling elites by rejecting the federal system and establishing exclusive patronage-based institutions that resulted in the secession of South Sudan (Kuol, 2019a). The current system of government adopted by the youngest country is not only centralized, but it exhibits features of autocratic unitary system. This system of government has contributed among other factors to the recurrent civil wars and violent conflicts. It has been shown that the process of constitution-making can cause civil conflict as the process itself can derail the peaceful intent of a constitution (Basuchoudhary, Bang, David, & Sen, 2021).

### **The 2018 Peace Agreement: The New Roadmap to Democratic Transition**

Since their independence in 2011, the people of South Sudan have not been given the opportunity to freely elect their government through a ballot box (see Figure 2). The Transitional Constitution of South Sudan (TCSS) provided for the conduct of elections within four years after independence. However, such elections did take place due to the eruption of the first civil war in 2013.

The 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) that ended the first civil war provided for the conduct of general elections towards the end of the four-year transitional period in 2019. Unfortunately, the elections were not conducted as the second civil war erupted in 2016. The 2018 Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) that ended the second civil war provided also the conduct of elections towards the end of the four-year transitional period in 2022. However, the ruling elites owing to their failure to implement the major provisions of the R-ARCSS related to elections decided to postpone the 2022 elections for additional two years until 2024. Again, the ruling elites were unable to make the necessary preparations for the conduct of elections in 2024 and postponed elections for additional two years that are to be conducted towards the end of 2026. With the current political and security developments in South Sudan, it is most likely that elections will be postponed again. This stalemate in democratic transition is largely influenced directly or indirectly by the aforementioned historical political processes.

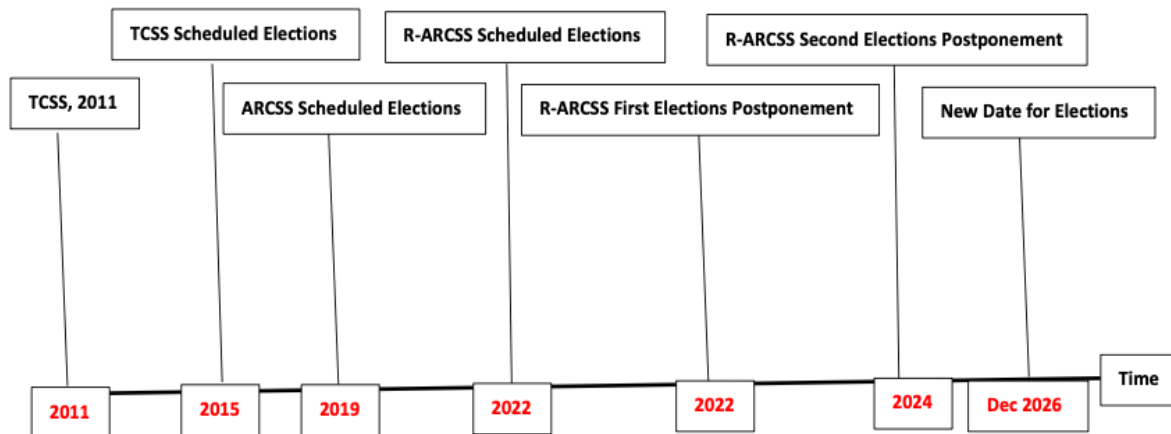


Figure 2. Elections Postponements timeline in South Sudan since 2011.

These repetitive postponements and deferral of the first elections of the youngest country underscored the elusive path towards a democratic transition and sustainable peace as the key and ultimate objectives of the R-ARCSS. Despite this persistent postponement of elections, the demand for holding elections has been declining since 2022 but remains very high even with the risk of electoral violence (see Figure 3). The postponements of elections in 2022 and 2024 have slightly affected people’s demand for holding elections but the last perception survey after the first postponement in 2022 shows more than 70% of participants demanded for holding elections as scheduled in 2024 (Deng, Pospisil, Dawkins, & Oringa, 2024).

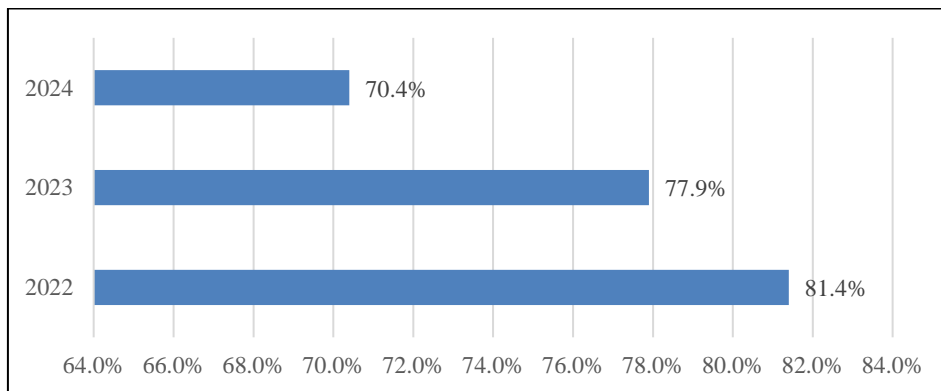


Figure 3. The demand for elections by the citizens. Source: Data from Deng et al. (2021-2024).

The survey shows that the majority of people of South Sudan had high hopes that the post-elections South Sudan will have a better government, security, and delivery of public services and improved good governance. Overall, a majority of respondents of the survey believed that the post-elections South Sudan will become less corrupt (74%), have improved service delivery (78%), and gain international respect (80%) (Deng et al., 2024, p. iv). This is a manifestation that the people are so dissatisfied and frustrated with the performance of the current power-sharing transitional government.

However, this persistent cycle of elections postponement may make people of South Sudan lose credibility in elections, raising fundamental questions about the legitimacy of the transitional government (Deng et al., 2024). The postponed elections in South Sudan are a symptom of deeper crisis that calls for strategic interventions to address structural issues towards a democratic transition (Vitaliano, 2024) and underscore a contestation between individual leaders' political ambitions and the citizens demand for establishing a stable democracy (Bali, 2024). Elections are seen by some ruling elites who captured states through violence to maintain their political powers in the power-sharing formula of the R-ARCSS (Githua, 2024).

One key informant summarized this dilemma by stating that "It is better for a nation to face its challenges while exercising elections and the entitlements of democracy than to die politically and economically with nothing". Another key informant argued that avoiding elections by resorting to the easy idea of extensions of the R-ARCSS is economically distracting and will not sustain and support peace and stability nor will it save the country from sliding again into violent conflict. One prominent civil society key informant suggested that in order to avoid this cycle of persistent postponement of the first elections in South Sudan, there is a need to address the structural drivers of such postponements by making the costs of non-implementation of the R-ARCSS higher than the costs of its implementation and to advance the "National Elections Campaign".

### **Stalled Democratic Transition: Structural Challenges**

Addressing the structural issues that derail pathway towards democratic transition in South Sudan requires a better understanding of these challenges. The Conflict Sensitivity Framework (CSRF, 2017) as discussed under methodology section provides basis and methodological approach for analyzing and understanding the structural challenges facing democratic transition in South Sudan. This framework has been used to provide reports on South Sudan's context analysis by examining three pillars of the context: political, economic, and security contexts within the overarching impacts of regional and global challenges (Kuol, Jadalla, & CSRF, 2024).

One of these context analysis reports used KoboCollect<sup>1</sup> mobile application to conduct online short questionnaire survey for 206 self-selected respondents from a pool of South Sudanese researchers representing different background in terms of gender, regions, disciplines, and level of education. Based on this online survey, the respondents prioritized three challenges that threaten peace and stability in South Sudan; namely economic (38%), political (31%), security (30%) with regional variations<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 4). While respondents from Bahr el Ghazal put economic challenges as the most important, respondents from Equatoria prioritized political challenges and the respondents from Upper Nile consider security as the most important challenge that threatens peace and stability in South Sudan. These variations in responses reflect that these challenges are interlinked in causing or creating difficult conditions for advancing peace and democratic transition. The regional variation

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<sup>1</sup> KoboCollect is an open-source mobile data collection platform. <https://www.kobotoolbox.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> The former three regions of South Sudan, Bahr el Ghazal, Upper Nile, and Equatoria, have become increasingly political entities and representative of the major ethnic groups with Bhar el Ghazal predominately Dinka, Upper Nile is largely Nuer and Equatoria is largely non-Dinka and Non-Nuer ethnic groups such as Zande, Bari, Taposa, and Latuka.

clearly captures the geopolitical dynamics and context specificity of these regions.

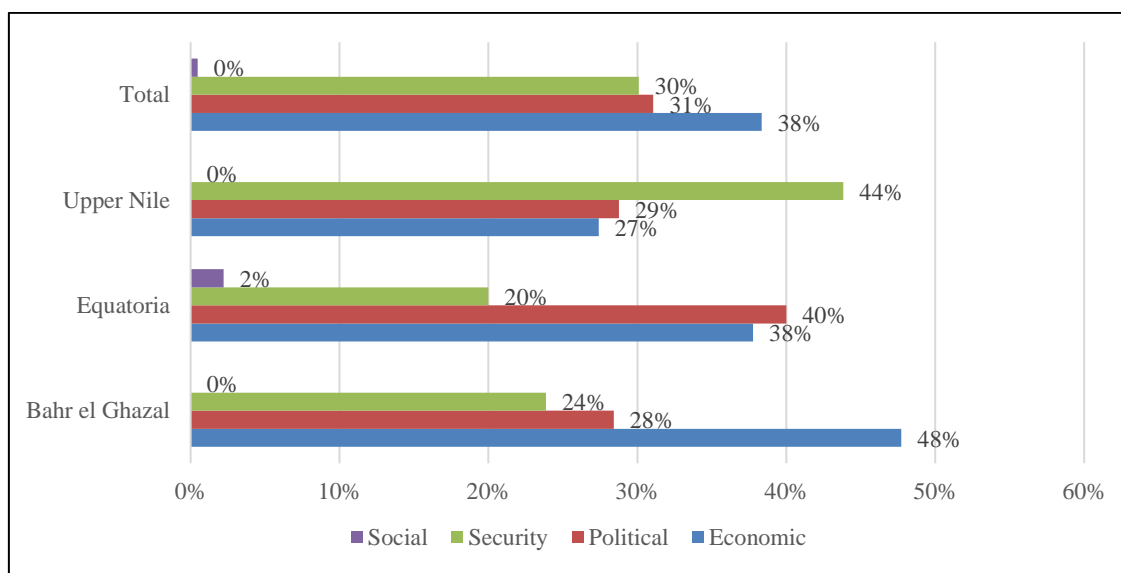


Figure 4. The most important challenge to peace and stability. Source: Kuol et al., 2024.

These structural challenges in addition to the role of regional and international actors are analyzed separately in terms of the relevant factors that hinder the democratic transition in South Sudan. Some of theoretical approaches discussed earlier such as structure-oriented approach, strategic choice approach, and institutions approach are used within the overarching governance-development-security nexus approach as captured in the Conflict Sensitivity Framework to understand better the dynamics of democratic transition in South Sudan.

### **Kleptocratic Economic Governance**

Despite its enormous economic potentials, South Sudan was ranked in 2025 as the poorest country in the world (IMF, 2025) with poverty and livelihood vulnerability remaining pandemic (World Bank, 2024). It was ranked in 2024 at the bottom of the 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2024). With government failing to deliver its core functions including the provision of basic social services and security and payment of salaries of public servants, the aid actors have almost assumed the roles typically held by government. One leading scholar key informant lamented that *a state that is unable to pay salaries to its employees is not yet liberated and independent (uhuru)*.

South Sudan faces a huge and perpetual fiscal deficit that reached about 46% in 2024 (World Bank, 2025b). This is attributed to increasing public expenditures that outpaced the available revenue envelope. The civil war that erupted in Sudan in 2013 has contributed to the disruption of oil pipeline that resulted in the reduction of 70% in oil revenue, the major source of revenue for the government, and made government unable to pay salaries of public workers and security forces. There is no adherence to the internationally accepted budgetary principles and budget discipline, making the government function almost without annual budget. One leading economist key informant argued that “this dysfunctional fiscal system has virtually relegated the Ministry of Finance to a mere cashier of the government and it is inept to forge a coherent fiscal policy to contribute to macroeconomic stability”.

Besides this fiscal deficit, the Bank of South Sudan (BoSS) continues to print the South Sudan Pound (SSP) to finance the growing, perpetual, and unchecked fiscal deficit (World Bank, 2025b, p. 12). This has resulted in

an increase of annual inflation to over 107% and drastic depreciation of the SSP with the parallel exchange quadrupled to over 400% in 2024 (World Bank, 2025a). Also, the public foreign debt is high and unknown as such loans are oil backed loans (World Bank, 2025b, p. 15) and with forward sale of crude oil reaching up to year 2045 as noted by one key informant. One former senior staff of the BoSS key informant observed that “the independent authority of the BoSS has been greatly undermined with the repetitive change in its leadership without adherence and respect of the 2011 Bank of South Sudan Act and with the persistent interference by the Ministry of Finance and other branches of the executive into its affairs, the BoSS has been relegated to a mere forex bureau”.

This economic system of South Sudan has been described as “kleptocracy—a militarized, corrupt neo-patrimonial system of governance....with copious revenue consumed by the military-political patronage, with almost nothing left for public services, development or institution building” (De Waal, 2014, p. 347). With such as system, the conduct of elections is not prioritized as reflected in insufficient allocation of resources to the elections-related institutions. The underfunding of the elections activities is part of the political calculation of the ruling elites to thwart democratic transition and to maintain the status quo of power-sharing formula without getting the legitimacy from the citizens through ballot box. These financial problems faced by the elections-related institutions constitute the major obstacle for the conduct of elections (Kabandula, 2024) and democratic transition in South Sudan.

### Politicized, and Fractured Security Sector

The majority (53%) of the people of South Sudan do not feel safe, while 42% feel safe (UNMISS, 2024). Besides this high-level feeling of unsafety and insecurity, the trend of such feeling is very alarming. While the feeling of safety and security increased after the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, such a feeling started declining since 2021 and it has been outpaced by the feeling of unsafety and insecurity since 2022 (see Figure 5).

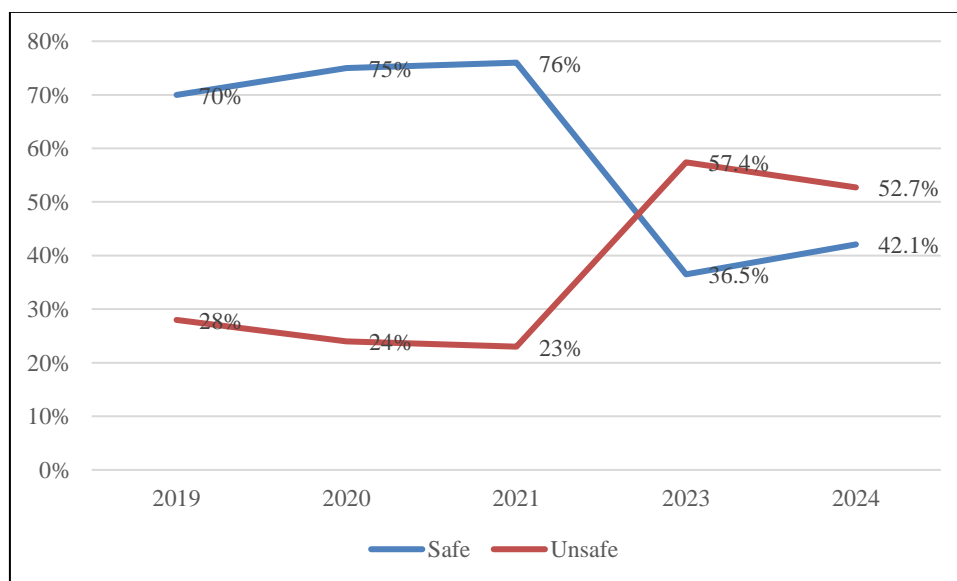


Figure 5. Level of security and safety in South Suda, 2019-2024. Source: Data from UNMISS, 2024.

In addition, the incidence of violence increased by 15% in 2024 (1,019 incidents) compared to incidents in 2023 (885 incidents), while the number of victims affected by these incidents of violence increased by 9% in

2024 (3,657 victims) compared to 2023 (3,340 victims) (UNMISS, 2024). The overwhelming majority of victims (79%) suffered in the hands of community-based militias and/or civil defense groups, while 15% and 6% of the victims were respectively attributed to the belligerent parties to the R-ARCSS and other armed groups, and unidentified armed elements and other opportunistic violence. This trend is unlikely to change in the near future; rather it may even deteriorate further after the escalation in 2025 of violence between the armies of the major parties to the R-ARCSS, the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF), and Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA)-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO).

These alarming statistics are a clear manifestation of the failure of the parties to the R-ARCSS to implement the security arrangements and to deliver the much-awaited safety and security to the citizens. The security arrangements in the R-ARCSS have been framed around the fallacy of power-sharing formula that provides for the politically shared security sector with many political actors. This has made the security sector inept to provide security and safety to the people and as a result South Sudan became in 2024 one of the three least peaceful countries worldwide (IEP, 2024). The security sector that was expected to be reformed and become professional and impartial has been politicized instead by the power-sharing formula of the R-ARCSS. This has weakened the security sector and fractured its leadership, as there are eight armies each having its commander-in-chief and the staffing of the security agencies apportioned on the basis of the power-sharing formula (Kuol, 2025a).

The design of security arrangements and security sector reform process in the R-ARCSS is unrealistic and ambiguous, particularly the unification of various armed groups under one professional national army. This process has instead incentivized the belligerent parties to the R-ARCSS to scale up recruiting more members to their armies making the process unmanageable and inept to produce a professional and a single national army (Craze, 2020). The result was un-implementable security arrangement with the presence of many armies and accentuation of the ethnicization of security sector that is a recipe for the next civil war. This politicized and fractured security sector will not create conducive security conditions for the conduct of elections, but it will instead militarize elections and become a source of violent conflicts related to elections and will continue to stall any democratic transition process in South Sudan.

These unrealistic and unimplementable security sector reform arrangements in the R-ARCSS will continue to haunt the implementation of the R-ARCSS. One key informant and former senior commander in the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) expressed deep concern about the security arrangements of the R-ARCSS that paralyzed almost the security sector governance, particularly the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF). Another key informant and former senior commander of the SPLA argued that "it is a paradox to continue having many commanders-in-chief since all the chiefs of the armies of the opposition groups have been commissioned into SSPDF and are members of the Joint Defense Board (JDB) which is in charge of all forces including the armies of the opposition groups". This shows that the security arrangements of the CPA were quixotically adopted to the R-ARCSS.

One key informant explained that "this arrangement of having more than one commander-in-chief during the CPA period was possible as the bulk of the SPLA including its chiefs of general staff and senior officers were not unified with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) except the Joint Integrated Units forces (SAF and SPLA) that were under the commander-in-chief of the SAF but overseen by the Presidency". Another key informant argued that the idea of the Necessary Unified Forces is not any longer valid as the leaders of the belligerent opposition parties have been sufficiently protected for the last six years despite no deployment of the necessary unified forces for their protection. This powerful account of the seasoned security experts indicates that the

implementation of the security arrangements of the R-ARCSS is pervasively facing the “Big Stuck” (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2016). Any attempt to continue pushing for the implementation of these security arrangements will exacerbate further the crisis in the security sector.

It is argued that the challenges facing the security sector and democratic transition in South Sudan could be traced back to the period of armed struggle of the SPLA during the second civil war of Sudan (1983-2005). The SPLA as the military wing of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) dominated the administration of the areas under the control of the SPLM. As the armed struggle was adopted by the SPLM to fight the Government of Sudan, the instrumentalization of violence and militarization of communities became necessary to support the war efforts of the SPLA and for the communities to defend themselves against the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and their allied militias. The military emerged as the ruling class with special status that gradually became superior to traditional authorities or even supplanted them. Even when the SPLM decided to separate civilian administration from military administration by establishing civilian administration known as the Civil Authority of New Sudan (CANS) in its liberated areas, the staffing of the CANS was mainly the SPLA military officers. It is argued that this militarization of the administration and social life and the political economy of military aristocracy that prevailed during the armed struggle in the South had paved the way for the gun class to flourish (D’Agoût, 2018; Craze, 2020) and that would come to dominate the post-CPA political order and even the post-independent South Sudan and continue to undermine the political transition in South Sudan (Nyaba, 2011).

In addition, the deployment in March 2025 of the special forces of the Ugandan People’s Defense Forces (UPDF) called “Operation Mlinzi wa Kimya” (*Silent Guardian*) to South Sudan at the request of President Salva Kiir has created situation of apathy, and demoralization in the security sector. This deployment has sparked mixed reactions, with many South Sudanese seeing such deployment as a violation of the R-ARCSS and infringement on their sovereignty and pride with foreign forces rather than national forces being prioritised and recognised as the guardians of the people of South Sudan. Although the objectives of this UPDF Operation in South Sudan are not clear, one senior key informant confirmed that the operation has two objectives to repulse the advancement of the Nuer armed youth, the White Army and to deter any possible coup d’état in Juba.

Although the size of the special forces and the period and scope of their operations are not known, the UPDF sought from Uganda’s Parliament about USD 39.1 million for this operation in South Sudan (Adam, 2025). It is unknown whether this budget is to be paid by Uganda or South Sudan or both. However, many senior key informants confirmed that the funding for the UPDF Operation in South Sudan is fully covered by the government of South Sudan. One key informant raised doubt about the commitment of the government to investing in building our national army as provided for in the R-ARCSS or to pay at least the salary arrears for the security forces instead of paying such huge resources to the foreign forces.

In addition to allocating such huge resources to the foreign forces, many key informants confirmed that this deployment was not discussed by the national parliament, cabinet, presidency, and the national security council in Juba. Also, this deployment was not coordinated with regional institutions such as the IGAD and the East African Community (EAC) and neighboring countries of South Sudan. One key informant echoed that such deployment of the UPDF special forces has angered most of the neighboring countries with the growing concern that some of the neighboring countries might unilaterally deploy their national forces to the bordering states of South Sudan in order to protect their national security interests.

### Political Factors

There is a wealth of evidence that attributes the root causes of prevalence of protracted violent conflicts and challenges of democratic transition to the quality of governance (O'Neil & Sheely, 2019). The emphasis on governance as the underlying brute causes of conflict and stalled democratic transition is critical for diagnosing the challenges of democratic transition. The aforementioned economic and security challenges that deepen the existing violent conflicts and stalled democratic transition in South Sudan are the manifestation of governance deficit.

In terms of overall governance, South Sudan has almost half of the average governance scores for the East African Community (EAC) (see Figure 6). While this low level of governance score is understandable as the youngest country that emerged from protracted violent conflict, the trend of governance score has been regressively declining since its independence with no chance of changing it in the near future.

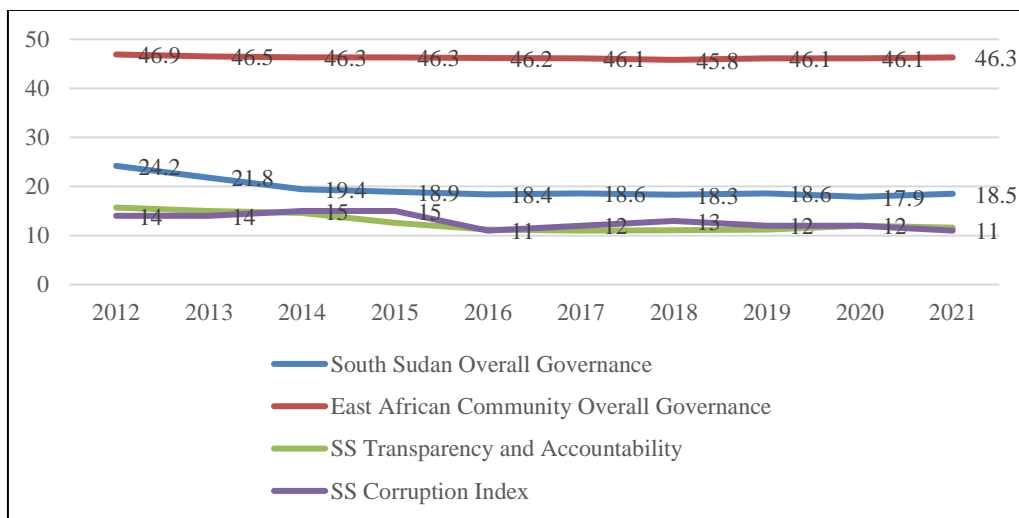


Figure 6. Governance SCORES, 2012-2021. Source: Data from Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG).

Also the transparency and accountability scores and corruption index are not only very low, but they have been rapidly deteriorating since 2012 with South Sudan consistently being ranked among the countries with the highest risk of corruption in the world. This political environment characterized by governance deficit has created unconducive environment for advancing democratic transition and the conduct of the first elections of the youngest state of South Sudan after its independence in 2011. Besides overall governance deficit, there are a number of political factors that contribute to the repetitive postponement of the South Sudan's first elections (Kuol, 2024). Some of these factors include but are not limited to the following:

**The coercive mediation process.** The quality of peace mediation process plays a critical role in the implementation of the peace agreement, building trust, ensuring the buying-in, and fostering sense of ownership and commitment to the outcome by the various parties to the agreement. There is a growing recognition that both the process and the outcome of peace negotiations are critical, but a well-designed mediation process itself often bears long-term significance and legitimacy of peace. A well-managed process of any peace negotiation is not only important in addressing the root causes of conflict and the underlying grievances, but it also provides a trusted platform for dialogue, building consensus and nurturing effective communication between and among the rival factions.

The IGAD-Plus mediation mechanism that was initiated for the negotiations of the 2015 peace agreement (ARCSS) was inclusive with the participation of the African Union (AU), UN, China, U.S., UK, European Union (EU), Norway, and the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF). Unlike the ARCSS, the mediation process of the R-ARCSS was largely dominated by Sudan and Uganda. Many observers and analysts considered such process as flawed, exclusive, and coercive (Kuol, 2019b). The process was an aberration to a standard mediation approach as it demonstrated an unusually fraught process and exhibited deficits in fundamental mediation pillars: preparedness, consent, impartiality, inclusivity, and strategy (Vertin, 2018). Some members of opposition groups were coercively forced by the Sudanese intelligence to sign against their will, some protocols of the R-ARCSS (Kuol, 2019b). Sudan under the Islamic regime of President Bashir was not a neutral mediator as they had glaring national political, security, and economic interests in South Sudan because they see the birth of South Sudan as a political project of the Western countries and therefore such a project should not be allowed to succeed (Kuol, 2019b, p. 69).

With this coercive mediation process, many analysts doubted whether the R-ARCSS would bring lasting peace. Some of the opposition groups opted not to be part of the R-ARCSS and those who were forced to sign the R-ARCSS did not have a genuine sense of ownership of the R-ARCSS. Even the President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, initially rejected to sign the R-ARCSS and he reluctantly signed it with doubt about its implementation. Mr. Pagan Amum, a prominent opposition leader who did not sign the agreement, echoed his doubt about the R-ARCSS and described it as never meant to be implemented (Nyamilepedia, 2019). This coercive mediation process has created mistrust and eroded collegial and partnership spirit among the parties to the R-ARCSS and this will continue to haunt the implementation of the R-ARCCS and thwart any efforts towards democratic transition in South Sudan.

**The fallacy of power-sharing peace agreements.** Power-sharing has been increasingly used in Africa as one of the mechanisms for conflict resolution and peace agreements. However, the experiences with this mechanism are mixed with some successes in containing conflict, while others have been less successful and have instead exacerbated violent conflict (Strand & Gates, 2008). As peace-building aims in long-run to build strong, sustainable, and democratic states, it is argued that power-sharing arrangements may undermine such efforts by putting in power those who have engaged in advancing violence as means of accessing power and are likely to be less interested in advancing democratic transition and may create instead less democratic states (Striram & Zahar, 2009). Some scholars concluded that the experiences with the power-sharing arrangements are generally less positive as they tend to exclude in the process the citizens; the primary beneficiaries of such agreements (Mehler, 2009).

In the case of Sudan and South Sudan, the experiences of power-sharing arrangements have not been positive. The 2005 Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended not only with the secession of South Sudan but also with two unviable, unstable, fragile, and autocratic countries. The elites who assumed political power in Sudan and South Sudan through power-sharing arrangements failed to build viable states and showed instead less interest to relinquish power through elections. The post-CPA states in South Sudan and Sudan have become increasingly susceptible to persistent violent conflicts and communal tensions that threaten their survival as states. The power-sharing formula of the CPA was adopted for ending the first and second civil wars in South Sudan. Yet, this formula is a fallacy as it has become a source of instability rather than peace (Knopf, 2024) by creating a dominant gun class (D'Agoot, 2018) that impedes genuine political and democratic transition in South Sudan. In addition, this formula has given rise to a political marketplace that personalizes governance (de Waal, 2016)

and less responsive to the needs of citizenry, while undermining institutions and the rule of law as well as inhibiting democratic transition.

**The in-built incentives to stall democratic transition.** Besides its power-sharing fallacy, the R-ARCSS has built-in incentives against democratic transition and elections. The R-ARCSS has created bloated transitional government consisting of five vice presidents, 35 national ministers, 10 deputy national ministers, 650 members of the national legislature (national assembly and council of states), and 13 national commissions with each commission having at least five members. In addition, there are 10 state governors, about 500 members of parliament of the 10 state legislative assemblies (each state has at least 50 members of the parliament), about 100 state ministers (each state has at least 10 ministers and advisors) and about 80 county commissioners. All these constitutional post holders are appointed as per the power-sharing formula of the R-ARCSS until elections are held. This makes South Sudan undoubtedly the country with the highest per capita number of unelected constitutional post-holders in Africa (Kuol, 2019b). The decision to postpone elections and extend the lifespan of the R-ARCSS as provided for in the R-ARCSS rests with these appointed constitutional postholders at the national level. These postholders have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo by frequently extending the transitional period and postponing elections, as elections could endanger return to their current positions.

In addition the ruling elites deliberately aborted the initiative of President Salva Kiir of requesting President Ruto of Kenya to mediate peace talks between his government and the R-ARCSS holdout groups. This initiative culminated in the Tumaini Initiative that was launched in Nairobi in May 2024. Although the process was elites-driven and disconnected from the ordinary people of South Sudan, the initiative had renewed hopes of reviving the R-ARCSS that is currently stuck. Despite optimism by many observers that such initiative would strengthen peace and the implementation of R-ARCSS, the INITIATIVE faced some challenges when some protocols were initialed in July 2024. In particular, the SPLM-IO, one of the major signatories to the R-ARCSS, rejected the initialed protocols. Other R-ARCSS signatories including some members of the SPLM-IG raised concerns and implicitly rejected the initialed protocols. The initiative is now stalled largely because of the narrow self-interest of the signatories to the R-ARCSS to maintain the status quo with the power-sharing in the R-ARCSS. Despite the Tumaini Initiative has been aborted, it remains the only initiative with the potential of resuscitating the R-ARCSS by addressing some of the structural challenges facing the implementation of the R-ARCSS (Kuol, 2024).

**Politicized elections-related independent institutions.** The R-ARCSS has provided for the establishment of relevant independent institutions for the preparation and conduct of elections. These institutions include the National Constitution Review Commission (NCRC) for the permanent constitution-making, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) for the conduct of population census, the Political Parties Council (PPC) for *the registration, supervision and regulation of political parties*, and the National Elections Commission (NEC) for the conduct of elections. The appointment to these institutions is based on the power-sharing formula of the R-ARCSS and political affiliation rather than merits, professionalism, and expertise. This has made it difficult for these institutions to deliver and perform their duties professionally (Kuol, 2019b). This has not only politicized and paralyzed these institutions but has also made them a battleground for political rivalry and division. Besides the politicization of these institutions, the R-ARCSS has made unrealistic prerequisites for the conduct of elections such as ratification of permanent constitution and conduct of the population census (Cheeseman, Biong, & Yakani, 2023, Kuol, 2019b).

**Absence of sunset clause in the R-ARCSS.** The conduct of free and fair elections is often used as the sunset clause for terminating the transitional arrangements of a power-sharing peace agreement (Strand & Gates,

2008). However, such a clause is not sufficient to end the power-sharing peace agreements. In the case of South Sudan, the R-ARCSS provides for free and fair elections as a sunset clause to end the transitional arrangements of the R-ARCSS. However, the belligerent parties to the R-ARCSS have used other provisions in the agreement to deliberately obstruct the conduct of elections. In particular, Article 8.4 of the R-ARCSS allows the parties to the R-ARCSS to amend the R-ARCSS (IGAD, 2018). This article has been used by the parties to the R-ARCSS to repeatedly amend the R-ARCSS and postpone elections and expand the lifespan of the power-sharing government. This makes the R-ARCSS as an agreement without sunset clause to terminate the transitional arrangements with free and fair elections.

### **Regional and International Actors: The Enforcement Challenges**

It is one thing to sign a peace agreement and it is another thing to implement it. The implementation phase of any peace agreement has been recognized as the most critical phase. The success of implementation of most peace agreements largely rests with the effective monitoring and oversight mechanisms. As in the CPA that established an independent Assessment and Evaluation Commission (AEC), the R-ARCSS provides for establishment of an independent Revitalized Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC). Unlike the AEC, the membership of the RJMEC is more inclusive as it includes members of civil society organizations, more regional guarantors such as member states of IGAD, African Union (AU) High-Level Ad-Hoc Committee, AU Commission, and more international partners and friends of South Sudan such as China, Norway, United Kingdom, United States of America, United Nations, and European Commission (IGAD, 2018, pp. 70-71). Also, while the chairperson of the AEC came from international observers, the R-ARCSS has specified that the RJMEC be chaired by a prominent African personality.

Despite its inclusivity and clear decision-making process, the RJMEC has not been effective in discharging its mandate of monitoring and oversight of the R-ARCSS. Since the collapse of the 2015 Peace Agreement due to lack of political will to implement the 2015 Peace Agreement, the RJMEC has lost the backing of the international community. In addition, the regional guarantors of the R-ARCSS, particularly the member states of IGAD, which are mandated to enforce corrective measures recommended by the RJMEC, have not been effective. The member states of the IGAD face their own intra-violent conflicts and even inter-conflict with each other's that weakened and paralyzed IGAD to enforce the implementation of the R-ARCSS. This casts doubt on the principle of subsidiarity in resolving intra-conflicts.

Also, during the negotiations of the R-ARCSS, the government of South Sudan resisted the establishment of the RJMEC and has deliberately undermined and intimidated its leadership and expelled its staff, making it inept to stand-up against the violations committed by the government (Verjee, 2020). Despite the persistent attack of the RJMEC and its leadership by the government, neither the member states of IGAD nor international partners and friends of South Sudan were able to back and defend the RJMEC, fostering the disregard of parties to the R-ARCSS for the RJMEC (Knopf, 2016, p. 13). The backing of the international community of the AEC coupled with its strong leadership allowed the AEC to build strong relations with both parties to the CPA, and to intervene effectively in crises (Verjee, 2020), including challenges related to the conduct of referendum for the people of South Sudan. The inadequacy of enforcement mechanisms of the R-ARCSS will continue to make South Sudan a hostage of kleptocratic system that will inhibit democratic transition and the conduct of elections.

## The Regional Implications and Recommendations

Despite context specificity, the analysis of the challenges of democratic transition in South Sudan may provide some subtle implications and actionable recommendations for the Horn of Africa as a region and its member states. The member states of the Horn of Africa share almost similar experiences and challenges of governing political transitions. Most of these countries face civil wars and others are facing civil unrest caused by grievances, governance deficit, and erosion of citizens' trust in their governments or have experiences of stalled, regressed, or failed political transitions. South Sudan is microcosm of the Horn of Africa region, as it is almost in civil war, experienced failed democratic transition in 2015 and 2019, and recently experiencing stalled democratic transition in 2022 and 2024 as provided for in the R-ARCSS.

### The Regional Implications

The flattering and stalled democratic transition in South Sudan has a number of implications to the Horn of Africa region and to some countries of the region, particularly its immediate neighboring countries in the region such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Some of these implications include the following:

**Forced displacement and refugees.** The political instability in South Sudan has forced large numbers of people to take refuge in the neighboring countries. There are 2.3 million South Sudanese refugees in host countries (Uganda 975,000, Sudan 613,000, Ethiopia 429,200, Kenya 192,900, and DRC 55,600) (UNCHR, 2025). The influx of refugees to neighboring countries creates pressure on already vulnerable host nations by increasing the strain on their ability to provide essential services such as food, water, and shelter (UNCHR, 2025). This situation has been exacerbated by the drastic cuts in aid. In 2025, UNHCR requires a total of \$491.5 million to address the emergency situation in South Sudan and neighbouring countries but only 18% was funded leaving funding gap of 82%.

**The economic and social costs.** The study conducted in 2014 after the eruption of the first civil war in 2013 indicates that if the conflict continues for another one to five years, it will cost South Sudan between US\$22.3 billion and \$28 billion (Frontier Economics, 2014). The study also shows the five countries considered in this study—Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda—could between them save up to \$53 billion if the conflict were resolved within one year, rather than allowed to last for five years. In addition, the study indicates that if the conflict ended within one year rather than five, the international community could save nearly an estimated US\$ 30 billion by reducing expenditure on peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, the conflict that erupted in 2013 continued for five years until 2018 when it was ended by the R-ARCSS.

Other effects of war such as environmental degradation, the break-down of social cohesion, and the psychosocial trauma in South Sudan pose challenges to regional security. In particular, South Sudan has an extremely high level of trauma, with a meta-analysis of several studies found that on average, individuals experienced nine war-related traumatic events, and pooled rates for mental disorders were high: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at 34%, anxiety at 25.2%, and depression at 24.2% (Mithika, 2025). If not addressed through trauma-informed and resilience-focused initiatives, these psychological scars will continue to perpetuate cycles of violence in South Sudan with far reaching impact on the regional stability. In addition, the stalled democratic transition and escalation of violent conflict in South Sudan will continue to disrupt trade with neighboring countries and hinder the Horn of Africa regional economic development and integration.

**Regional security and stability.** The recent escalation of fighting between the main signatories to the R-ARCSS that is largely attributed to the stalled democratic transition has created security vacuum that can be

exploited by armed groups and other criminal actors to undertake or scale-up their transitional organized crime across the countries of the region such as human trafficking, illicit border trade, smuggling of goods and arms, terrorism, cybercrime, and illicit financial flows. The East Africa region and the Horn of Africa in particular have the highest level of criminality of transnational organized crimes, criminal markets, and criminal actors with low level of resilience and response to the rising transnational organized crime (ENACT, 2023). The stalled democratic transition in the Horn of Africa will create conducive environment for criminal actors and criminal markets to flourish across the borders of the countries of the region. In addition of spillover of transnational organize crime, the escalation of violent among the major armed groups will fuel ethnic tensions and increase intercommunal violence within South Sudan and across borders, which further threaten regional peace. With the deployment of the special forces of the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) in South Sudan, there is a risk that South Sudan would become a theater for regional rivalry and competition with increased border tension between South Sudan and most of its neighboring countries in the region, particularly Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda.

**The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).** The IGAD has been playing an important role in mediating peace negotiations in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Sudan and South Sudan. However, the crisis in Sudan has weakened IGAD and created division between its member states. The apparent failure in the implementation of the R-ARCSS is largely attributed to the weak leadership of IGAD that entrusted the mediation of the R-ARCSS to Sudan and Uganda that resulted in coercively mediated agreement and making the two countries as the major guarantors of the R-ARCSS and entrusted the two countries to lead the ceasefire monitoring. With the crisis in Sudan, Uganda becomes implicitly the main guarantor of the R-ARCSS and coupled with the division among member states of the IGAD over Sudan, the IGAD is inept with limited leverage over the signatories to the R-ARCSS. The recent deployment of the Ugandan People's Defense Forces (UPDF) to South Sudan and upon the request of the leadership of South Sudan is likely to divide further the IGAD with the growing concerns about the possible increased tensions and escalation of rivalry over South Sudan by some member states with high national interests in South Sudan.

**The emerging middle powers competition.** The region of the Horn of Africa has recently attracted the middle powers competition, particularly from the Gulf countries, making the region a new battle ground for the Gulf rivalry. This rivalry is a complex competition for political, economic, and security influence among Middle Eastern powers, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Turkey, and their rivals like Qatar (ACSS, 2025). It has been shown that these countries are heavily investing in critical infrastructure in the region to advance their strategic national interests in the vital Red Sea trade route. This rivalry will heighten regional conflicts, division among member states of the region as well as exacerbating internal dynamics, as some of these countries do often align with different factions within countries, leading to complex geopolitical and security outcomes in the region (ACSS, 2025).

With the eruption of civil war in Sudan that threatens the export of its oil and coupled with its ailing economy and legitimacy, South Sudan has been dragged into this Gulf rivalry with increasing investment by the UAE in infrastructure, energy, and security as well as seeking economic bailout with soft loans from the UAE. The Transitional National Legislative Assembly of South Sudan unprecedentedly ratified recently in one session four bilateral agreements with UAE on exemption of entry visa requirement, air services, agreement on avoidance of double taxes and prevention of fiscal evasion and bilateral investment treaty (Okuj, 2025). While South Sudan is managing carefully with balanced diplomacy the complex relation with the warring parties in Sudan, the Sudan

National Army and Rapid Support Forces, the increased reliance of South Sudan on the UAE will likely compromise its balanced diplomacy with far-reaching consequences to its oil exports through Sudan. This improved relation between South Sudan and the UAE and indirectly with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has strained relations between South Sudan and the Government of Sudan in Port Sudan. This has become clear with recent official request of the Sudanese authorities to the Government of South Sudan for a “safe shutdown” of oil pipeline facilities following a series of drone attacks near key energy infrastructure (Radio Tamazuj, 2025).

### **Actionable Recommendations**

On the basis of the analysis of the determinants of the stalled democratic transition in South Sudan within the overarching development-security-governance nexus framework, here are some recommendations for advancing and facilitating the democratic transitions in the Horn of Africa:

**Modalities of political transitions.** As each country of the Horn of Africa has its unique political environment for political transition, the change through compromise between the existing regime and opposition or between the belligerent parties to the conflict will be dominant modality of political transition in the region. Some authoritarian regimes will be forced to initiate some reforms in the light of the growing grievances, particularly among unemployed youth, and the threat of popular uprising and civil unrest. Although the political instability, weak governance, and structural fragilities increase coup probabilities, the possibility of political transition through coup d'état can be reduced in the region through reform and compromise (Cebotori et al., 2024). As political transition in the Horn of Africa is desired to occur through compromises and negotiations, the design and process of such negotiation will be critical for ending conflicts and creating conducive environment for democratic transitions in the region.

**Regional mediation.** The principle of subsidiarity has emerged to advance the preference of regional mediation in resolving intra-conflicts and sustaining peace in the region (Moller, 2005). In the case of Africa, the principle of subsidiarity is based on the assertion that “Africas are responsible for African conflicts” and on the assumption that countries of the region are not part of the intra-conflicts and have vested interest to resolve such conflicts as they bear the costs of such conflicts in terms of refugees and loss of economic opportunities. This assertion has been challenged as intra-conflicts are a result of a complex interplay of internal, regional, and global factors. The case of civil war in South Sudan has brought to the fore the underlying regional tensions, rivalries, and power struggles that weakened IGAD's mediation (ICG, 2015) with some of its member states pursuing narrow national security interests to destabilize South Sudan (Kuol, 2019b). Despite the limitations of the IGAD, there is a need for a realistic and regionally-centered mediation strategy that will garner the much-needed support of the international community. The IGAD-Plus mediation mechanism that was adopted for the 2015 Peace Agreement (ARCSS) provides a basis for developing a new regional mediation strategy for the Horn of Africa.

**Power-sharing formula.** There is a growing evidence that shows power-sharing peace agreement is not only a fallacy, but it can accentuate the grip of power by the belligerent parties to the peace agreement and inhibit any democratic transition. This is manifested in the case of South Sudan. While ending war and building peace may necessitate appeasing warlords, there is a need to limit the powers given to the belligerent parties in managing the post-conflict transitional period and preparation for the conduct of elections. There is increasing call for exploring other options for managing post-conflict political transitions. Some of these options include; an international transitional administration (Knopf, 2016), an African Union-led transitional administration (Mamdani, 2016), or a caretaker transitional administration led by technocrats and eminent national personalities

(D'Agoot & Miamingi, 2016). In the case of South Sudan, a hybrid arrangement composed of untainted South Sudanese technocrats and African Union-United Nations nominees may be the preferred pathway for managing the transition in South Sudan. Although these options will hardly be accepted by the belligerents, they may need to be considered in the negotiations of future power-sharing peace agreements in the region and to put pressure on the belligerent parties to limit their dominance in managing democratic transitions.

**The sunset clause for ending power-sharing formula.** Most of the peace agreements have the conduct of free and fair elections as a sunset clause for ending the power-sharing peace agreements. As shown in the case of South Sudan, this clause is not sufficient to end the fallacy of power-sharing formula as there are other provisions that would allow the belligerent parties to the peace agreement to amend the peace agreement, postpone elections, and extend the transitional period. In the case of South Sudan, it has been suggested that a new political infrastructure consisting of hybrid of technocrats and eminent national personalities, rather than the transitional government of the belligerent parties, is to be created so as to manage the political transition if the parties fail to prepare the necessary conditions for the conduct of free and fair elections (Kuol, 2024). This sunset clause needs to be included in future power-sharing peace agreements in the region and to limit the powers of the belligerent parties to the peace agreement to create conditions for perpetual postponement of elections and extension of their tenure in transitional government.

**Enforcement mechanisms and civil society involvement.** The biggest challenge facing power-sharing peace agreements is the enforcement of the implementation of these agreements. There is a recognition that the success of any peace agreement rests with the buying-in and commitment of the parties to the power-sharing peace agreement (Strand & Gates, 2008) as in the case of the 2018 Peace Agreement that lacks the commitment of the belligerent parties. Besides the commitment of the parties, there is a growing evidence that shows the inclusion of civil society in all the phases of negotiation and implementation of peace agreements increases the chance of durable peace (Cuhadar & Druckman, 2024). In the case of South Sudan, the inclusion of the civil society in the negotiation and implementation of the 2015 and 2018 Peace Agreements has been effective in championing and advocating for the democratic transition and conduct of elections. In particular, the inclusion of civil society in the Revitalized Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) has availed opportunity for the voices of the citizens to be reflected in the enforcement of the R-ARCSS. The inclusive monitoring and oversight mechanism in the R-ARCSS provides a basis for designing more effective enforcement mechanisms for future power-sharing peace agreements in the region.

## Conclusions

In recent years, the governing of democratic transitions in the Horn of Africa has faced numerous obstacles. Understanding these barriers to democratic transitions requires a holistic framework such as the development-security-governance nexus. The application of this framework to the context of South Sudan shows that some structural conditions such as high level of poverty, hyperinflation, excessive debt, severe food insecurity, and famine-like conditions as the policy outcomes of the *kleptocratic economic governance* put structural stumbling blocks to democratic transition in South Sudan. In addition to these structural conditions, the politicized and ethnicized security institutions with unprecedented high level of corruption risk, and coupled with dysfunctional justice sector and high level of intercommunal and intracommunal violence make these security and defense institutions inept to create the conducive security environment for democratic transition but they by themselves have become instead a threat to democratic transition. Besides the direct impacts of each of these set of challenges

related to development, security, and governance, these challenges reinforce themselves causing even more and profound barriers to the democratic transition in South Sudan. Addressing these challenges will require a holistic approach, as any progress in one of these three pillars of the nexus is instrumental for advancement in the other pillars.

Importantly and above all the challenges to the democratic transition in the region is the governance deficit characterized by high level of corruption risk, weak transparency and accountability and unprofessional security and defense institutions that created unconducive environment for the political transition and democratic transition. In the case of South Sudan, this governance deficit is a result of peace agreement that was coercively mediated and created in-built incentives for the ruling elites who came to power through the barrel of the gun rather than through ballot box to thwart democratic transition. The web of intertwined economic, security, and governance challenges facing South Sudan has created the cycles of faltered political transitions as buildups on failed attempts towards democratic transition in South Sudan.

The growing governance deficit is caused by the rise of increasingly authoritarian governance and the surge in coup d'états, autocracies, and regression in democracy in Africa (Hugues, 2025). While there are many drivers for such surge in military coups, the prominent drivers include a mix of international and domestic dynamics, a web of interwoven governance deficit issues and a growing intolerance for regimes that misrule and pursue their self-interests under the guise of democratic elections and their deliberate betrayal of the social contract with their citizens (ISPI, 2023). In addition to the resurgence of the military coups, there is a striking surge in the civil protests led by informed, well connected, and educated youth; the late millennials and Generation Z with potential of driving democratic consolidation across Africa. Although the Gen Z are advancing new democratic ideals beyond voting and elections, they have a greater willingness to tolerate military intervention when elected leaders abuse power, as manifested in their support of some recent military coups in Africa (AFRO, 2024).

Despite the bumpy and elusive path toward democratic transition in the region, there is a strong preference of democracy as more effective than other forms of governance (AFRO, 2024). The growing educated, informed, and well-connected new generation demanding accountability, transparency and good governance; the growing urban population with improved access to public information, the surge of vibrant civil society and media, and easy access to information technologies will be the real drivers for sustainable democratic transition and stability in the region.

While peace agreements will provide opportunity for democratic transition and conduct of elections, building and strengthening checks and balances mechanisms, and empowering and strengthening the non-state oversight actors such as civil society and media will create conducive environment for durability of peace and advancing democratic transition. Prioritizing the effective participation of civil society and ensuring civic space in future peace agreements in the region will enhance the opportunity for durable peace and peaceful democratic transition. With the growing demand for democracies, the path toward democratic transition is inevitable despite the short supply of political will to expedite such transition in the region.

Whilst the engagement of belligerent parties in peace agreements is unavoidable, the design of mediation processes becomes critical for prioritizing democratic transition, particularly the effective participation of civil society, women groups, and youth groups as key stakeholders in advancing good governance and democratic transition. In addition, robust and enforceable sunset clause and credible and inclusive monitoring and oversight mechanism in these agreements will be essential for ensuring and sustaining democratic transition.

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