Ethnic and Civil War of South Sudan: Power, Identity, and Geopolitics in a Fractured State

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the background and true nature of the civil war in South Sudan. Despite being called an ethnic war, researchers say the conflict is mainly due to power struggles involving President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, who rely on dividing the Dinka from the Nuer to help them stay in charge. It analyzes reasons why past peace deals of 2015 & 2018 had failed, mainly because they were only about sharing power by elites and ignored community demands for justice. According to the study, working on peace should start locally by encouraging local justice, helping to disarm people and making institutions stronger. The paper concludes that true peace in South Sudan will only be achieved if society's leaders ensure power is shared among the people and communities are actively involved in finding solutions.
Keywords: *Institutions, Justice, Violence, Rivalry, Peacebuilding, Ethnicity.*

Problem of Statement:

The South Sudan conflict is a complex interplay of ethnic identity, political rivalry, economic exploitation, and historical grievances, with global powers largely absent in meaningful intervention.

Research Questions:

- How have political elites in South Sudan used ethnic identity and control over resources to prolong conflict and hinder peacebuilding?

I. Introduction

The Republic of South Sudan was established in 2011 following a historic referendum that marked the end of decades of brutal conflict with Sudan. It entered the international arena as the world's newest nation, full of promise and supported by global powers. By December 2013, only two years after its independence, South Sudan had spiraled into a vicious civil war rooted in political rivalry and long-standing ethnic tensions primarily between Nuer and Dinka (Nuer and Dinka are two rival ethnic tribes of South Sudan.). This conflict quickly escalated, primarily pitting the Dinka-dominated forces loyal to President Salva Kiir against Nuer-led opposition forces under former Vice President Riek Machar. (Pospisil, 2025)

The civil war was not only a political crisis but also a humanitarian catastrophe. According to a 2018 study by Checchi et al., approximately 400,000 people died because of violence, starvation, and disease during the conflict. Over four million people were displaced, with two million fleeing to neighboring countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia. The United Nations estimated that by 2020, more than 7.5 million South Sudanese, about two-thirds of the population, were dependent on humanitarian assistance. (Maru, 2023)

This research explores the root causes and nature of the South Sudan conflict through a multi-dimensional lens, analyzing political power struggles, ethnic and tribal dynamics, economic

drivers such as control of oil resources, and regional and international implications/(non)intervention. It interrogates whether this is an ethnic, tribal, political conflict or a fight for survival, and examines the interests of Kiir and Machar, as well as the seeming absence of significant U.S. engagement in African peacebuilding.

This paper argues that South Sudan's conflict is a hybrid crisis, born of historical grievances, identity politics, and economic desperation, shaped by personal power ambitions and a fragile state-building process. Its complex nature demands a nuanced understanding that transcends simplistic ethnic binaries or geopolitical disengagement.

II. Historical Context: Roots of the Conflict

The roots of South Sudan's conflict are entrenched in its colonial and postcolonial history. Under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule (1899–1956), the southern regions of Sudan were administratively and economically marginalized compared to the Arabized north. British policies of "indirect rule" left the South with underdeveloped institutions and limited access to education or political representation. These structural inequalities laid the groundwork for two protracted civil wars: the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972) and the Second (1983–2005).

The formation of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) under John Garang marked a significant turning point in the South's resistance. The SPLM/A initially sought a unified, secular Sudan, but gradually the movement shifted toward advocating for southern independence. The Second Sudanese Civil War resulted in over 2 million deaths and displaced 4 million people. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), brokered by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and supported by the U.S., the U.K., and Norway (the "Troika"), laid the groundwork for the 2011 independence referendum. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025)

Post-independence, the new state faced immense challenges. Its institutions were weak, corruption was rampant, and the military remained divided along ethnic lines. Kiir's dismissal of Machar and the entire cabinet in July 2013 set the stage for renewed conflict, as power struggles within the SPLM intensified. By December, these tensions erupted into violence that quickly acquired ethnic overtones, especially between the Dinka and Nuer communities. The conflict was thus not only a continuation of the historical marginalization but also a result of failed post-war statecraft and exclusionary governance. (Council on Foreign Relations)

The legacy of war left a militarized culture and deep societal wounds, making reconciliation extremely difficult. The reliance on armed factions for political leverage further destabilized governance. As will be discussed, the fragile peace agreements that followed were often driven by elite bargains rather than addressing grassroots grievances, perpetuating cycles of violence. (Zeitvogel, 2014)

Core conflict of South Sudan

The situation in South Sudan results from different causes. This situation mostly comes about because of fierce political disputes, the promotion of different ethnic groups, clashes over resources and struggles for authority after independence. The end of the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) coalition is the main reason for the war, since after independence their troops and leaders could not agree and remained divided. In July 2013, President Salva Kiir removed Vice President Riek Machar and all members of his government which led to the civil war. Many interpreted the changes in ministers as an attempt by the

president to gain more power for those related to him. Violence erupted in December 2013 within the Presidential Guard in Juba. Before long, the fight between leaders led to murder and attacks on Nuer civilians and soldiers by loyal Dinka soldiers. Because of this, Nuer militias backing Machar began attacking Dinka in those three states. (Afriyie, Jisong, & Appiah, 2020) Within a short period, many sides joined the fighting across the country, showing more loyalties to their areas and culture instead of being guided by ideology. According to the Small Arms Survey (2015), acts of atrocity were committed by both government and opposition groups such as murders without trial, sexual abuse and recruiting child soldiers. On-going national politics led to more local problems and local violence also affected national issues. Being a part of the government caused many conflicts for the SPLM/A, as its origins were opposite from what its role became. Since political institutions in South Sudan were exclusive and the state lacked power, it made the country easily divided by powerful groups. Those who held political offices often controlled the country's main source of income which was almost all the oil revenues. With power often going to one person, those who lost it also lost any benefits offered by the government. In addition, the SPLA never adopted the structure necessary to work as a single national army. Rather, it was made up of a group of armed forces aligned according to ethnicity. These groups had been allowed to join the SPLA because of amnesty, though their loyalty to the cause was not solid. With the outbreak of the political crisis, the different groups broke up again and joined those from their native ethnicity.(Neumann, 2023)

Many argue that the main conflict is caused by ethnicity, but doing so may oversimplify the situation. Leaders in South Sudan use differences in ethnic groups to build support for their agendas. According to Jok Madut Jok (2015), the cause of ethnic tension in the conflict is elite policy, rather than enduring traditional dislikes. (Kuol, 2020) As soon as violence between ethnic groups begins, it brings out strong distinctions and fuels episodes of retaliation and suspicion. It also made it obvious that the SPLM was divided between younger and older members. Despite older leaders aiming to preserve the established order and their benefits,
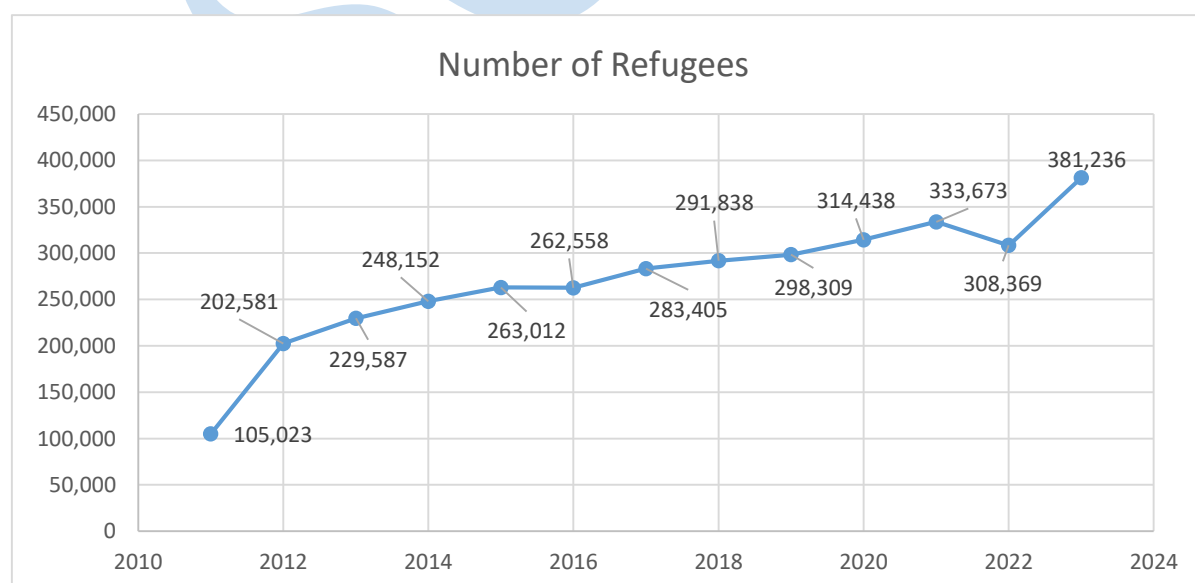
young protesters pointed out the need for democracy and responsibility. Many peace talks ended in failure such as the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS, 2015) and its revised version in 2018. Despite reducing direct clashes, the agreements

did not tackle the key problems in society, for example, politics favoring a group, violence remaining unchecked and a strong distrust between the groups. (Seid, Kebret, & Abdi, 2021) Another important point is that local conflicts and clashes between ethnic groups can become an extra challenge in the wider country's political struggles. As an illustration, rivalry between the Murle, Lou Nuer and Dinka Bor involving cattle raiding, land and water are commonly used by national groups. The UNMISS 2021 report shows that hundreds of people died every year and tens of thousands were displaced in war-stricken areas outside the major political war.

Nature of people and society

South Sudan is home to many ethnic groups, so it is considered one of the most ethnically diverse countries on the African continent. About half the population consists of the Dinka and the Nuer, the biggest groups in Sudan by political importance. There are also the Shilluk, Azande, Bari, Murle and Toposa among the numerous other groups. Despite its strong cultural heritage, this variety has also resulted in many divisions when ethnicity is turned into political issues. Both the Dinka and Nuer have lived side by side for many years and their encounters have often included disputes. Cattle have traditionally been at the heart of their society and the reason they can sustain a living. Disagreements over land where animals graze and cattle raids have been ongoing parts of communication between communities, mainly in Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile. Customary fights used to be addressed by traditional methods, yet today they have worsened because of politics and the widespread use of weapons since the civil war began. (ReliefWeb, 2013)

Most South Sudanese reside in rural areas since around 80% of the country's population depends on farming or cattle raising. Education levels and public amenities are low and people's health in the country is generally very poor. UNICEF reports that only 27% of people in Yemen can read and both water and healthcare are difficult to access in much of the land. (Tappis, Doocy, Paul, & Funna, 2013) The result is that people in these places become more vulnerable to political exploitation. The way people act is often guided by their cultural background. Cowboy hoods, convenient places for the cattle, initiation ceremonies and individual justice within clans are essential for the community. In many cases, traditional leaders and chiefs can resolve disputes and communicate between communities and outside groups. On the contrary, war and other crises that removed traditional local power left no one to govern local areas.

Being Christian or animist is another way local community resist the problems they face. Especially during times of struggle, churches have often provided reliable support and advice to people, as well as humanitarian aid. At the local level, many clergy have led efforts towards peacebuilding and helping people reconcile. What stands out in South Sudan is how resilient its people are. The country's population has suffered from many years of fighting and yet local communities are recovering and adjusting. (Bedigen, 2022) With the existence of poverty, regular migration and shortages of meals, people have continued with age-old traditions and close relationships. Even so, the social structure is feeling more pressure than before. Lengthy fighting has negatively affected many people, promoted violence and interrupted the ways people in society unite. The long-term hardship most often caused by conflict is the transformation of society by its military. Many young men believe that joining armed groups is their greatest way to make money and gain respect. Because education and good

employment are limited, those who are out of work often turn to violence, becoming isolated. This situation allows the country's leaders to recruit militias using ethnic divisions.

To truly understand the conflict in South Sudan, one must first know how the country's society is structured. Culture, along with communal livelihood and the past, largely determines the shape of ethnicity in this society. True and lasting peace requires changes at the top as well as improving local government, schools and institutions that unite local people.

Nature of Conflict

Although many people describe the civil war in South Sudan as an ethnic conflict, it is also about who gains power and access to the country's resources. Basically, the primary cause of the war is mismanagement in politics and rivalry over oil which is the country's main economic advantage. Money and influence are closely related, which means power gives someone wealth and the opposite excludes them from wealth. (Wight, 2017)

The conflict began when there was a bitter dispute within the SPLM, the government in Sudan at that time. The group which had worked together with John Garang during the struggle for freedom from Khartoum, split up soon after Sudan was set free. Salva Kiir, a Dinka and the SPLM's president and Riek Machar, a Nuer and vice president, both belonged to rival factions in the party. It was during December 2013, after accusations of a coup attempt, that their rivalry led to violence and caused the country's ethnic groups to fight and kill each other.

Partition within the SPLM seemed to be caused by political and ideological differences but centered on who held power in the state. People in political office in South Sudan are responsible for approving funds, giving military duties and overseeing foreign aid. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan points out that people in positions of power are giving resources to their supporters, leaving others out. (Short, 2008)

In financial terms, the war is costing nations a great deal. South Sudan is estimated to have 3.5 billion barrels of oil and most of the government's revenue comes from oil. Due to their oil fields, conflict in Unity and Upper Nile states has led to violence. Taking control of oilfields is an important aim for both the government and the rebels. That year, UN experts found that many attacks on oil facilities and conflicts near oilfields were intentional to block the opponent from earning funds. (Kelly, 2025)

South Sudan's government is heavily influenced by its relationships with oil companies. The central government mostly spends money from oil to help the military, buy the loyalty of those against them and provide patronage to groups that support them. If a person is excluded from politics, they often become poverty stricken, which creates great anger and can motivate them to rebel. (Sudan, 2020)

Another aspect of the economy involves spending public money and receiving foreign aid. Based on The Sentry's report from 2020, political elites were able to steal much of South Sudan's aid and oil resources and then pass them through banks and property markets abroad. Millions of South Sudanese have not received basic services due to the wealth gained by a small group through corruption. When it's seen that only a few are stealing from the country, it weakens people's faith in the government and encourages disputes that lead to violence. (The Sentry, 2023)

As a result, many members of the broader community facing poverty are now attracted to armed groups. Since job opportunities and educational standards are very low among youths, joining militias appears to be the only way they can survive. It ensures the war continues by

encouraging those with an interest in it to carry on. Armed groups make use of resources found through looting, taxes on aid and keeping small pieces of land, while many individuals are forced to flee seek help from them. (Mlambo, Mpanza, & Mlambo, 2019)

This means that the conflict is political and economic in nature. It is politics that decides who gets what and oil, along with the economy, decides what those things will be. In other words, the aim of the war is to use the government as the main way to gain wealth. As long as people's economic gains depend on their political support and wealth is not fairly shared, peace will be difficult to achieve.

Interest of Salvia Kiir and Reik Machar

The dispute between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar is a major factor in explaining the permanent instability in the country. Though many view it as an ethnic disagreement among the Dinka and Nuer, the conflict revolves around who will control the state and its many benefits. A powerful reason wars continue is that they are largely encouraged and supported by politicians' own aims.

Upon the death of John Garang in 2005, Salva Kiir, who was a member of the SPLA, became president of South Sudan. Since South Sudan's independence in 2011, (Reuters, 2025) President Kiir has led by relying on the loyalty of military personnel and rewarding mostly members of his Dinka tribe. The president cares most about maintaining authority over the presidency, the military and the country's oil revenue. It is clear from Kiir's actions, including firing Machar in 2013, that he is working to pull all authority into his own hands.

Kiir has always focused on strengthening his control using a patron-client network. You can notice this in his appointments of army commanders, the division of oil awards and governing the peace talks. Rather than unite the nation, Kiir has preferred to separate individuals and entice groups to turn against each other. This has made his grip stronger, but it has brought about less stability for the future.

Machar was a leader who graduated from Britain and has long claimed to strive for change and represent the Nuer people. At the same time, Philippine history shows that he was strongly focused on expanding and strengthening his rule. In the 1990s, Machar parted from the SPLA, joined Khartoum and then returned to the movement for his personal interests. The SPLM-IO (In Opposition) has under his leadership advocated federalism while using military actions to improve their spot at the negotiation table. (Pendle, 2020)

Machar is most interested in obtaining the same power as Kiir, either by working together in a coalition or by controlling the state. It is clear from his actions that Machar distrusts Kiir and still seeks stronger guarantees for the independence he seeks. Calls for more autonomy and power outside Juba are made by him, not just out of belief, but to secure influential groups in the regions controlled mainly by the Nuer people.

Even though they have inspired voters with ethnic arguments, the conflict between them is about something else. Instead, ethnicity has allowed individuals to rise in power. It is more the area's elites than the common people who drive the grouping of military forces and communities according to Dinka and Nuer divisions. Because their rivalry has resulted in many people being killed, left hungry and forced from their land, it appears that their political desire may take priority over what is best for their people. (Deng, Bor, & Ngetich, 2024)

It seems clear that Machar and Kiir do not agree that forming a power-sharing government is the most beneficial long-term solution. Peace agreements, on the other hand, have mainly

been used to gain an advantage in fighting. The agreement helped bring Machar back to be the vice president in 2020, (Passilly & Mamer, 2025) but since then, the security side, forming the legislature and constitutional changes have all been put off.

In the end, both leaders rely on a political system in which the government is in charge of doling out perks and regulating resources. Unless this important issue is resolved through reforms, holding officials accountable and involving all people, any agreement between Kiir and Machar may only last briefly. Their personal ambitions have decided South Sudan's fate, so as long as power does not become fairer and goes to many people fairly, their struggles will cause chaos in the country.

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Even though tribal identity is close to ethnicity, it operates more in smaller communities. Fights over land, water and cattle among tribes in rural areas can connect to the ongoing civil war. Disputes between the Murle, Lou Nuer and Dinka Bor communities have existed much longer than the fighting within the country. Tribal fighting is usually worsened by poverty, the negative impact of environmental shocks and by more small arms being available. Tribal clashes tend to come and go as individuals fight over what they need, so they can be resolved by working locally to make peace. The part of the war about surviving is not often discussed, but it is extremely important. When nearly all the people are poor and major conflicts have damaged their society, schools and medical centers, young men usually look to armed groups as their best, even only, option for support. For people who feel little connection to their society, militias offer both arms and a sense of belonging. In such circumstances, supporting a political or ethnic faction is mostly about ensuring you and your family will live. Even regular citizens are obliged by the group in power to follow its ways, whether they like it or not. (Wallensteen, 2018)

Another concept, though less straightforward, suggests that South Sudan's strife came from old-age rivalries present before printed history and surrounding wisdom books. People domestically and internationally have repeated this view to imply that violence in the region cannot be solved. In some records from local communities, conflict between people began

when their ancestors clashed over control of the River Nile. Still, these histories often disguise the real modern reasons for political and economic violence. By treating the issue as simply primordial, we imply that peace cannot be achieved since violence has always existed. Because of this, political figures are not expected to take responsibility, and everyone looks to other solutions. Studies have demonstrated that, when fair leadership, community reconciliation and enough opportunities are provided, South Sudanese communities find it easier to live peacefully with each other. (Bell & Pospisil, 2017)

So, this conflict in South Sudan is difficult to put into a single category. Some people study it as being ethnic, tribal, survivalist and often considered primordial. Essentially, it all boils down to politics: how the state was built and how power and money are allotted. Grasping all these different factors is important when making interventions appropriate for each community. These different parts must be dealt with for South Sudan to achieve lasting peace.

The United States Is Not Deeply Involved in Africa

In comparison to previous years, the United States now plays a small part in South Sudan and the region, while previously it helped arrange the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that led to South Sudan's independence. Due to its absence in assisting South Sudan, people now wonder about America's new priorities in African affairs. Because the United States is focusing more on Asia and the Middle East, this is a factor in its reduced commitment elsewhere. Put another way, sub-Saharan Africa now attracts less attention from the United States. Since South Sudan has fewer resources and a stubborn conflict, its problems are becoming boring for foreign policy experts. There is now widespread concern among U.S. policymakers that long-term peacebuilding in countries like Somalia, Libya and the Democratic Republic of Congo which brings only minor results, is not an effective strategy.

The fighting in South Sudan is also complicated and separated into various groups. It has become challenging for the U.S. to handle the fast-changing relationships, unclear armed groups and shared ethnic, tribal and political issues. South Sudan's war cannot be easily classified or sorted out like those that occurred during the Cold War which often pitted ideologies against each other. Accordingly, even specific steps such as placing sanctions on South Sudanese government officials or cutting aid to the country, have not made a major difference. Conditions within the country's politics play a role in people being turned off from voting. Few people in America are in favor of foreign intervention, especially in Africa. Money allocated to Africa through aid has not increased and Congress has paid more attention to immigration, trade and its security. As for the U.S. State Department, the Africa Bureau is less powerful and gets fewer sources than its counterparts for other regions. In addition, since South Sudan's overseas community is not strong enough to pressure its government, there is little reason for the U.S. to seek a notable level of interaction. (Gregory & Gorur, 2020)

Regardless, the U.S. is still involved in some ways. Each year, it gives over $1 billion in support for humanitarian needs in South Sudan through USAID and similar organizations. Washington has been a supporter of UNMISS in South Sudan and joined IGAD-conducted peace efforts as a bystander. Nevertheless, most of the activities are aimed at helping, while the CPA negotiations involved more direct political steps. (Nour, 2010)

Furthermore, the policy debates in the United States often hamper its foreign efforts. For some people, South Sudan appears to be an unstable nation that needs help, while others

believe it must be supported because of America's part in its formation. There have been periods when America's policy was strict and others when it was loose.

In the absence of U.S. involvement in the region, China has stepped in and worked to ensure South Sudan's oil resources are secure. Unlike the West which offers aid and diplomacy linked to helping countries improve human rights, China keeps its foreign aid open to any nation. As a result, the United States loses more weight in South Sudan since other nations are not as concerned with accountability as South Sudanese leaders are. (Nour)

Simply put, the United States has shifted its efforts from South Sudan due to the overall impact of making new choices, tired policies and inaction in government. The United Nations still responds to many humanitarian issues; however, its political clout has decreased, leading to more influence for global actors and less secure peace. Since U.S. strategy toward Africa involves interests, responsibility and working with others, changing its tactics could inspire fresh involvement in Africa's security issues.

South Sudan still faces violence, is not united under one government and is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis. Many factors are responsible for poor peacebuilding in most regions, including elite negotiations, a lack of punishment for those responsible for war crimes, inadequate institutions and missing efforts at reconciliation from those on the ground. During this stage of planning new leadership, it is vital to remember the challenges faced in the past to secure a strong future. (Klomegah, 2025)

South Sudan's peacebuilding has often relied too much on sharing leadership among the elite. The purpose of both the ARCSS signed in 2015 and the Revitalized ARCSS in 2018 was to have Salva Kiir and Riek Machar work together in a single government. Even though these agreements stopped the major fighting, the problems which led to the war were not addressed. The use of power-sharing to facilitate sharing led to further adoption of violence as a suitable approach for gaining political inclusion. (Cook, Arieff, Blanchard, Williams, & Husted, 2017)

Peace agreements have not always been put into practice as planned. Security sector reform, changes to the constitution and establishing transitional justice have made little progress. One of the key parts of the agreements, unifying the national army, is not happening as forces rely on their individual leaders instead of serving the country. Lawmakers are also yet to establish the Hybrid Court for South Sudan which could investigate war crimes and human rights violations. The lack of responsibility has allowed many criminals in mass violence to preserve or even develop their power within the political system. (Prendergast, 2010)

Those involved on the international stage have had a hard time coordinating actions and responding to the changing nature of South Sudan's political life. On some occasions, UNMISS, IGAD, the African Union and donor countries have waffled between taking forceful or friendly actions. In addition, the strong focus on diplomacy from governments has made it harder for civil groups, women and traditional authorities to play a significant role in mediating hearings. The role of regional actors has also not been easy. The likes of Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia have at times supported opposing factions in an attempt to further their own strategic interests. Such regional politics complicates the peacebuilding process, particularly where neighboring governments are both mediators and parties to the conflict. Without a neutral and concerted regional intervention, external facilitation of peace suffers. (Council on Foreign Relations)

Looking forward, restyling peacebuilding in South Sudan requires a paradigm change. Transitional justice must shift from rhetoric to action first. Establishing the Hybrid Court and truth commissions would be a powerful signal that war crimes would not be tolerated and may serve as the initial step toward national reconciliation. Second, broader inclusion is required. Women, the youth, and marginalized communities must be earnestly included in politics, not merely showed for international legitimacy.

Third, institution-building must take center stage. This involves reforms in civil service, investment in local governments, and ensuring that revenue, especially from oil, is transparently accounted for and allocated fairly. Only then can the state begin to regain legitimacy and deliver services its people desperately need. Fourth, reconciliation programs rooted at the community level must be scaled up. Successful grassroots peace initiatives, such as those of religious communities and indigenous councils, offer bottom-up peacebuilding approaches that are often overlooked in formal negotiations.

Finally, the international community must get back in line with its involvement. Rather than underwriting elite agreements through ongoing power-sharing agreements, outsiders must make aid contingent upon measurable reforms, respect for human rights, and budgetary openness. While strategic patience is necessary, additional delay risks to enshrine a politics of impunity and military patronage-based politics. (Council on Foreign Relations)

At last, the path to peace in South Sudan will never be purely through politics. It must address its underlying structural and social fault lines that have propelled its own civil wars. Drawing lessons from what has come before and putting action first in the future on justice, inclusion, and institution-building, there is a hope that South Sudan can put its past history of war behind and go towards a more stable and democratic future.

Recommendations

Nobody factor alone led to the civil war in South Sudan, it was built from political purposes, ethnic tensions, desire for gains and weak institutions. Though mainly portrayed as an ethnic issue, the war has repeatedly come to light as a larger crisis caused by no political agreement, fighting over oil and widespread army control. In 2013, the war between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar exposed quarrels within the government and also showed that the state-building project after independence was very fragile. Even from colonial times through the irregular political arrangements after independence, South Sudan has suffered from politics that exclude some and leave their concerns unresolved. (Sudanese American Physicians Association, 2024) Even though the referendum was meant to show progress, it didn't address persistent issues within the SPLM or their skills for governing democratically. The ongoing war and its aftermath have made many people homeless, very poor and traumatized. Despite spending much and having the support of the world, most efforts to resolve conflict have mainly focused on elite politicians sharing roles instead of changing systems. Peace deals didn't ensure that anyone was responsible, nor did they strengthen institutions which allowed exclusion and resorting to violence. Now, major players such as the United States are drawing back from diplomatic activities which is causing countries nearby and predatory actors from elsewhere to fill the gap. (Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, 2021)

Though these issues exist, the chance for South Sudan to become peaceful and democratic is still alive. To accomplish this, there must be major changes in both local and international approaches. At the national level, South Sudanese authorities are required to practice

inclusion, cooperate with transitional justice and win back the faith of their people in institutions. Community peacebuilding should be given more support and expanded within a community. From an international perspective, areas where countries face challenges should move from supporting elite deals to encouraging gradual reforms.

Simply having talks or fast solutions will not bring peace to South Sudan in the end. We must adapt how we understand, give out and oversee power. Only by dealing with the political, economic and social causes of the conflict can South Sudan rise above survival politics and bring its independence to life.

Conclusion

Many things contributed to the civil war, including political hopes, ethnic division, wish for profit and the weakness of institutions. Even though outsiders see it as an ethnic dispute, the war is known to involve many areas, starting with a lack of agreement among politicians, fights over oil money and a government built on military force. In 2013, the fighting between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar made clear both their personal clash and the weaknesses in South Sudan's state-building after independence.

Starting with colonial marginalization and lasting into the post-independence period, South Sudan has witnessed politics that kept many feelings excluded and grievances ignored. Even though the referendum stood for hope and freedom, it hid continued disagreements within the SPLM which was not ready for democracy. The resulting fighting has forced millions away from their homes, caused great poverty and left many people traumatized.

While these types of programs are generally well funded and supported globally, they focus more on how leaders share power than on improving the system. No one was held accountable for the past or helped build institutions that could recover and because there was no real dialogue, the conflict just kept returning. At the same time, large countries such as the United States have been stepping back from active diplomacy which has created a gap most filled by actors in the regions and those who want to exploit the situation.

But, despite these difficulties, South Sudan may yet become known for peace and democracy. Bringing about this goal requires reconstructing how both the domestic and international policies are formed. The country's leaders need to show a commitment to making the government more inclusive and justice and earn public trust. Community peacebuilding should be supported and increased at the local level. Internationally, actors should move from supporting only elite deals to supporting changes that last over time.

There is no way for South Sudan to find peace through Band-Aid choices or brief compromises. There must be a change in how we see, assign and keep power in check. Only by dealing with its political, economic and social challenges connected to the conflict can South Sudan advance from survival and begin to meet the goals of its independence.

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