



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## WEEKLY REVIEW

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### The Boiling Frustrations in South Sudan

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South Sudan's 2018 peace agreement that ended the deadly 6-year civil war is in jeopardy, both because the parties to it are back to brinkmanship over a number of mildly contentious issues in the agreement and because the implementation process has skipped over fundamental steps in a rush to form a unity government. It seems that the parties, the mediators and guarantors of the agreement were of the mind that a quick formation of the Revitalized Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) would start to build trust between the leaders and to procure a public buy-in. Unfortunately, a unity government that is devoid of capacity and political will is unable to address the fundamentals of peace, namely, security, basic services, and justice and accountability. The result is that the citizens at all levels of society are disappointed in RTGoNU, with many taking the law, order, security, and survival into their own hands due to the ubiquitous absence of government in their everyday lives. The country is now at more risk of becoming undone at its seams than any other time since the liberation war ended in 2005.

The current state of affairs in the country has been long in the making. Since April 2020, following a stalled formation of the Revitalized Government of National Unity (RTGoNU), there has been growing frustration in the country. Citizens had hoped that the political developments in February and March had created sufficient momentum to push the parties toward full implementation of what was clearly a grounded Peace Agreement. One of the key decisions that created this thrust was the President's decision to return the country to 10 states. The issue of the number of states and their boundaries was considered a major hurdle toward the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS).

For many citizens, agreement on the number of states was a harbinger for full implementation of the long-awaited, revitalized peace process. Such a step forward led generally to a growing sense of relief in the country, resulting in a growing belief in the possibility of peace and stability returning to South Sudan. This optimism was powered by Riek Machar Teny's return to Juba and taking an oath of office on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of

February 2020 as First Vice President of the Republic, along with the other vice presidents. This prompted the formation of the RTGONU and the institution of a 35-member cabinet, setting the momentum toward peace and stability.

Unfortunately, this optimism didn't take long before it dissipated. The outbreak of the coronavirus disease, the devastating communal violence, the menacing floods, and the government's failed response are getting many citizens worried. This is on top of the fact that the parties to the R-ARCSS, who were moving well, suddenly stopped and reverted back to bickering over non-contentious issues. For example, the parties failed in the last three months to agree on the formation of state and local governments. The talks stalled over the interpretation of the percentage share of responsibility contained in the Agreement. This was reportedly resolved through a press statement released by the Presidency on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2020. That same evening, FVP Riek Machar Teny released a contrary statement, dismissing the Presidency's claims of such an agreement. FVP Riek Machar was later relieved as the de facto head of High-level Task Force on COVID-19 and the whole body, which is now practically dead, was reconstituted. Many citizens believe this move was politically motivated. These two events injected poison into an already toxic relationship between the two leaders and prompted fear of the repeat of 2016 incident.

Since then, the parties have gone silent on the implementation of the Peace Agreement, with citizens sometimes only restrained by the focus on COVID19, which is proving to be a good cover for political failures. This silence and lack of clarity on what the parties are doing, the fear of coronavirus, pinching economic situation and lack of steady political leadership have led to growing frustrations in South Sudan. Speaking to citizens on the streets, they feel completely lost and fast losing hope. The optimistic outlook that filled the air in mid-February and March appears to be fast waning. The feeling of a failing peace is beginning to set in, and all of the key indicators suggest that the country is sliding back to instability.

In recent months, there have been reports of an upsurge in communal violence in Bahr el Ghazal, particularly in Tonj, Lakes, Twic, and parts of Western Bahr el Ghazal. There are also reports of communal violence in the Upper Nile region, especially around Unity and Jonglei states. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, the Murle attacked Lou Nuer areas, killing over 300 people, many of whom women and children. By the time of writing this review, there are allegations of retaliatory attacks against the Murle by the Lou Nuer and Bor Dinka, a cause for alarm. In recent weeks, there have been violent confrontations between communities in Warrap and Unity states, embroiling soldiers masquerading as cattle raiders, with these attacks and counter attacks reportedly involving the use of heavy artillery and tanks. Attacks and cattle raiding by Bul Nuer of Mayom County, Unity State, in Apuk, Kongor, Lou, and Twic in Warrap State all throughout the month of May, have resulted in countless deaths, massive displacement, loss of cattle and destruction of villages. Unfortunately, it is now reported the attacked communities are preparing themselves to launch revenge attacks on Bul. Lastly, there has been an intensifying confrontation between the NAS, government and SPLM-IO forces around Yei, troubling the recent Rome Declaration.

We have also been monitoring social media outlets, noticing an upsurge in negative campaigns and hate messages, especially on Facebook and various listservs. We have also noticed reactivation of propaganda websites by the parties and spewing false information intended to fuel discontent and trigger violence. A number of open letters were issued by groups from Equatoria complaining about Dinka cattle herders causing havoc in their areas and warning pastoralists to move back to their places of origin or face the wrath of ordinary citizens in those areas. Due to last year's flooding and growing insecurity and disease in Jonglei, there has been a massive movement of cattle from Jonglei to Equatorias, causing fear and raising tensions in the affected areas. These indicators suggest that South Sudan faces a major risk of a large-scale, spontaneous violence, unless the parties to the Agreement act fast.

South Sudan has never been in a more precarious situation than it is now. The real fear is that violence could actually break out for no apparent political cause and such violence may not be led by the known belligerent parties. It could be triggered by quite a simple issue. The growing uncertainty about the future of the country, the complete absence of political leadership, especially at the grassroots, the growing economic hardships, fear of coronavirus, and lack of hope, are simply hiking the level of frustration in the country. The rapture of violence on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2020 in Shirkat, a suburb of Juba, is one simple manifestation of the frustrations that are building up in the society. More of these could become regular occurrences in many parts of South Sudan and the absence of state and local governments is a recipe for more discontent and insecurity.

The role of diaspora in fueling violence and financing it is something that should be watched. We have seen prominent members of the diaspora, especially after recent attacks in Lou Nuer areas, reacting and understandably so, in a manner that indicates that they have lost faith in the government and would want to take matters into their own hands to protect the innocent civilians. We have also seen this reaction when Twic State was attacked in May 2019, as well as in Bor in 2014 and 2017. We are now witnessing the same among Equatoria members of the diaspora. This trend suggests that sustained violence could be financed through those channels. This may become common if the belief that the government is unable to protect people continues to be widespread.

The most serious source of discontent is the appearance by the parties and the political leaders not to care about the growing frustrations and lawlessness in the country. Even the international community does not seem to be pushing for the implementation of the Agreement anymore. Inside the country, all of the political actors have gone silent. Even the activists and the church are hardly speaking out about the state of affairs in the country. The abrupt postponement of the National Dialogue Conference adds to the citizens' disquiet about the future of the country. A combination of these conditions paints a depressing image.

To ease the boiling tensions and frustrations, the parties to the R-ARCSS need to demonstrate leadership and rescue the country by implementing at least the key provisions of the Peace Agreement. The parties should renew their spirit of cooperation

and working together as a government in good faith. They should resolve forthwith the issue of states and appoint governors to allow the political process to shift to the states and counties. This could give some hope to the citizens who are yearning for a positive action. The parties should reopen direct talks with the SSOMA through the Rome process and recommit to the cessation of hostilities. The parties, through the RTGONU, need to start peace dividend projects to boost the economy and create jobs for the youth. The RTGoNU should immediately address the communal violence. The parties also need to return to two important agreement items that they have overlooked. The first is the question of security arrangements, the fate of the fighting forces from opposition and the future of military integration. The second is the dissolution and reconstitution of the national legislature. Both of these items were supposed to precede the formation of the RTGoNU. More importantly, the parties need a strong, coordination, communication, and messaging strategy to enable them rebuild citizen's trust and confidence in government.

The political leadership in South Sudan has for years reneged to communicate with the people of South Sudan. Leadership is much more about communication and less about dishing out favors. The citizens should be persuaded to persevere with the situation, made to know and understand the magnitude of the challenges facing the country, and allowed to fully participate in the transitional, political processes. It also involves the government communicating what it is planning to do to alleviate the suffering of the citizens. The government is essentially running out of excuses. With a new dispensation inaugurated, it now needs to act in a manner that is responsive to the aspirations of the citizens to restore hope. The citizens simply seek the government's sustained communication on current affairs and plans.

If the government is unable to communicate, is not able to protect, is not able to provide services, and is virtually absent on the ground, then the importance of the government to the citizens becomes readily questionable. When the citizens seek answers into these laxities but get no response, they get frustrated, subsequently taking their frustrations out on each other or on the government, whichever is the source of provocation.

While political leadership is required, the threats of state plunge into chaos can also be de-escalated by citizens acting responsibly. The peddling of unconfirmed reports of tribal violence and the invocation of tribal identity at every moment of disagreement have made for a very volatile society, one that a government could try to contain but cannot change in short order.

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### **About Sudd Institute**

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

## **About the author**

*Abraham A. Awolich* is a founding member and the Managing Director of the Sudd Institute. Awolich's research interests are in governance, public administration, and international cooperation. Awolich serves double roles as Deputy Coordinator and the Head of the Finance and Administration Unit for the National Dialogue Secretariat. Before this, he was a Board member of the National Revenue Authority of South Sudan. Awolich holds a master's degree in Public Administration (MPA) from Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University where he was a McNair Fellow. He graduated in 2005 with B.A. from the University of Vermont where he was a McNair Scholar studying Anthropology and Business Administration. Awolich was awarded the William A. Havilland Medal for outstanding achievement in Anthropology. In 2006, he won the prestigious national award in the United States; The Samuel Huntington Public Service Award for his commitment to public service.