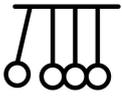


TURKEY'S UNHEARD VOICES

# The conflict in South Sudan

POLITICS

DERİN SÖNMEZALP



## Abstract

The conflict in South Sudan is one of the clearest examples of how extreme corruption (as one of the key factors in why the conflict began) can lead to substantial national conflict, with other contributing factors being political power struggles, ethnic tensions, and the lack of strong institutions. The rampant and tragic human rights violations highlight the gravity of the war and its impact on the nation and its surroundings. The violence has displaced millions, caused widespread famine, and destabilized neighboring regions. Despite multiple peace agreements, lasting stability has remained elusive, raising questions about the effectiveness of international mediation and the challenges of nation-building in a post-conflict society. This article examines the historical context, root causes, and consequences of the South Sudanese conflict.

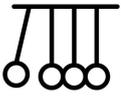
## Background

South Sudan is one of the newest independent nations in the world, having gained independence in 2011. Egypt first conquered the geographical area of modern-day South Sudan and was later jointly administered by British-Egyptian colonial authorities in the late 19th century. During this period, Christian missionaries played a significant role in promoting the English language and Christianity in the South, creating deep cultural and religious differences from the predominantly Arabic-speaking and Muslim North.

When Sudan gained independence from colonial rule in 1956, Southern Sudanese leaders were promised inclusion in national political processes. However, this promise was not fulfilled by the central government in Khartoum (the capital of Sudan), which led to long-standing grievances and the outbreak of two civil wars between the North and the South: the First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972) and the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). These conflicts resulted in the deaths of an estimated 2.5 million people, primarily civilians, due in large part to violence, famine, and displacement. The Second Civil War is regarded as one of the deadliest conflicts since World War II.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) played a central role in mediating peace talks between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), representing the South. These negotiations, supported by the international community, particularly the United States, led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. The CPA granted Southern Sudan six years of autonomy, culminating in an independence referendum. Under the terms of the agreement, a semi-autonomous regional government was formed, governed by the SPLM, with the promise of a future vote on secession.

George Athor, the Sudan People's Liberation Army lieutenant general and a Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) dissident who led the South Sudan Democratic Movement



(SSDM) and its military wing, the South Sudan Defence Army, led the South Sudan Democratic Movement in rebellion against the government in 2010, after a disputed election. That same year, a similar situation occurred. A coalition of the SSDM, named the Cobra Faction, led by David Yau, rebelled against the government, accusing it of being prejudiced against the Murle. The coalition signed a cease-fire agreement with the government in 2011, and his militia was reintegrated into the army, but he defected again in 2012.

The 2011 referendum resulted in an overwhelming 98% vote in favor of independence, and South Sudan officially became an independent country in July 2011. However, since gaining independence, the country has faced major governance challenges, including extensive corruption, internal power struggles, ethnic rivalries, and weak state institutions, which have contributed to ongoing instability and conflict.

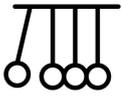
## Cause of Conflict

Post-referendum and independence, South Sudan, as a nation that gained its independence fairly late compared to other nations, dealt with significant challenges, leading to substantial struggles, which ultimately led to the conflicts in the first place.

Tensions between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar (both senior figures in the SPLM) boiled over in 2013 due to personal ethnic divisions (Dinka vs. Nuer) and disagreements over the political party's future. In December 2013, Kiir accused Machar of attempting a coup, prompting violent clashes within the presidential guard. This caused a brutal civil war, with the SPLM splitting into sections, primarily the government and the opposition SPLM-IO led by Machar. The conflict quickly escalated into widespread ethnic violence.

Following independence, the SPLM faced difficulty transitioning from a liberation movement into a unified governing institution. The SPLM had developed a militarized and hierarchical structure centered around a few powerful leaders. This structure became disproportionate to democratic governance. The party became fragmented along ethnic and personal lines. President Salva Kiir, from the Dinka, gradually compressed power and filled political and military posts with Dinka allies. This deepened the divide with Vice President Riek Machar and his Nuer base, further intensifying political rivalries and including ethnic rivalries within them.

The heavy reliance on ethnicity created a fragile system, which political inclusion was connected to ethnicity and military loyalty. As tensions increased within the SPLM, attempts to address governance issues through dialogue were replaced by mutually destructive competition for control over state resources, most notably, oil revenues. Another issue arose:



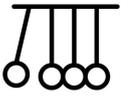
corruption, which became widespread, with billions in state funds reportedly lost to embezzlement, which enriched political elites while basic human rights and services remained underdeveloped. The SPLM leadership prioritized governmental power over developing the nation and the comfort of citizens, proving its incompetence and unreliability.

Corruption in South Sudan was one of its primary causes and a consequence of the conflict as well. Post-independence, oil revenues, which made up most of the government's income, were consistently mismanaged and used to enrich political elites. These resources were diverted through patronage networks. In 2012, President Salva Kiir publicly acknowledged the scale of the problem in a letter addressed to 75 officials, where he stated, "An estimated \$4 billion is unaccounted for or simply put, stolen by former and current officials". Despite this acknowledgment, little was done to hold these individuals accountable. The government's failure to address corruption worsened internal conflicts within the SPLM and deteriorated public trust. This lack of accountability created a political environment where leaders relied on armed violence rather than negotiation to resolve disputes, further destabilizing the nation.

### Consequences of the Conflict

The ongoing conflicts have immense impacts and consequences that have affected the region and its people significantly. The conflict, throughout its existence, has caused humanitarian and economic crises, gender based violence, and issues regarding education. According to the World Food Programme, over 7.1 million people face extreme hunger, with 1.6 million children suffering from acute malnutrition, caused by the conflict, the collapse of local agriculture, and rising food and fuel prices, which have also been increased due to the conflict. The incompetence of the government to maintain supply chains or invest in infrastructure has left regions of the country in a state of emergency. Non-governmental organizations are unable to keep up with the growing needs of the population, which is a direct indicator of how significant and urgent the ongoing conflict is.

Thousands of children have been recruited by armed groups. Many are used in direct combat or support roles in combat. The ongoing violence has also forced the closure of many schools, leaving children without access to education. Gender-based violence has also increased alarmingly, with women and girls targeted in acts of sexual violence. A United Nations survey revealed that approximately 70% of women residing in displacement camps have been subjected to rape since the onset of the conflict in 2013, with the majority of perpetrators identified as members of police or military forces, highlighting the systemic nature of sexual violence in the region, often employed as a tactic of war and oppression.



## Peace & Mediation Efforts

Several peace and mediation attempts have been made to solve the conflict in South Sudan. In August 2015, the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) was signed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, aiming to end the civil war. The agreement outlined requirements for a permanent ceasefire, the establishment of a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), security arrangements, and reforms in governance and the economy. However, in July 2016, renewed clashes in Juba between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and then First Vice President Riek Machar led to the collapse of the agreement, meaning the agreement was not able to make proper changes for peace within the region.

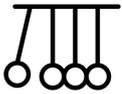
IGAD facilitated the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, aiming to address prior faults by reaffirming commitments to a ceasefire, reconstituting the TGoNU, and outlining timelines for security sector reforms, constitutional development, and elections. However, due to delays in unifying armed forces and establishing transitional justice mechanisms, the implementation has been slow and fraught with challenges as aforementioned.

Many organizations and unions have been key actors in the peace and mediation efforts for the conflict in South Sudan. IGAD has been central to mediating South Sudan's peace processes with its regional influence to bring parties to the negotiation table and monitor agreement implementation. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has provided support through the protection of civilians and facilitation of humanitarian assistance. The Troika has offered diplomatic backing and financial support, emphasizing the importance of adhering to peace agreements. The African Union has also played a role, particularly in advocating for accountability and the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms.

Despite multiple agreements, peace efforts in South Sudan have largely faltered due to a lack of political will, delayed implementation, ongoing combat, and unattained humanitarian crises.

## Conclusion

The conflict in South Sudan illustrates how independence does not guarantee peace or stability. After achieving sovereignty in 2011 with high hopes for progress, internal challenges such as ethnic divisions, political rivalry, widespread corruption, and weak institutions quickly damaged those anticipations. The power struggle between political leaders, along with elites, and the collapse of state systems caused violent conflict, impacting the entire state, its surrounding region, and all civilians. Despite repeated peace agreements



and international efforts, lasting stability has not been achieved due to poor implementation, lack of political will, and ongoing humanitarian crises. Without addressing governance, justice, and the rebuilding of institutions that serve communities, peace will remain fragile and unachievable.

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