

“DON’T TAKE THIS AWAY FROM US AGAIN” CITIZEN PERCEPTIONS OF PEACE IN SOUTH SUDAN POLICY BRIEF 1/2020

by
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The parties to the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) made an important breakthrough in February 2020, paving the way for the establishment of a Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). This followed more than nine months of postponements and strategic delays. Days before the 22 February deadline to form the R-TGoNU, the government and opposition group signatories of the R-ARCSS agreed to revert from 32 states to the former 10 states and three “special administrative areas” in Abyei, Greater Pibor and Ruweng.¹

Furthermore, the five vice-presidents provided for in the R-ARCSS have been appointed, with the leader of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO), Riek Machar, serving as First Vice-President. Governors and county commissioners have been relieved in preparation for the formation of the new government. Critical tasks remain, including the provision of security for opposition leaders in Juba, the cantonment, screening and training of unified forces, the appointment of vacant positions in the executive and legislature, and a plan for how to finance further implementation of the agreement. The so-called holdout groups to the agreement, such as the National Salvation Front (NAS) headed by Thomas Cirillo, respect the ceasefire established in the Equatoria region by the Rome Declaration. However, they demand to be included in the R-ARCSS framework, which will present

substantial structural challenges. Nonetheless, recent progress has reinvigorated political optimism that the parties may follow through on their commitment to implement the agreement.

In this volatile context, a research project entitled, “Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan,” funded by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), seeks to investigate, document and draw policy lessons from citizen perceptions of the peace process in South Sudan. Little is known about how people experience the newfound peace in their daily lives and how they understand and assess the ongoing conflict transition. The project investigates how peace talks at the national and subnational levels have shaped the way that citizens experience violence, peace and security. This policy brief discusses the preliminary results from the first stage of research, which consisted of qualitative data collection in interviews and focus group discussions stratified along gender, age, displacement status, locality and societal/professional role in five areas of South Sudan: Juba, Bentiu, Pibor, Wau, and Yei. The findings are based on discussions with over 120 people and will inform the development of a large-scale survey with a longitudinal component in ten locations across the country and among the refugee population in neighbouring countries.

Peace at the local level

South Sudanese civilians across ethnolinguistic groups predominantly equate peace with security. The ability to move within and between towns and the countryside is the main concern across locations. Accordingly, many see security arrangements as the most important element of R-ARCSS. When speaking about local attempts at conflict management and peacemaking, people raise reconciliation between armed actors as the main task. By establishing a

¹ President Kiir first increased the number of states by presidential decree from 10 to 28 in October 2015, then expanded to 32 in January 2017.

sustainable ceasefire throughout the country, the signing of the R-ARCSS enabled positive changes in this regard. As a consequence, the security situation in towns improved and the first contingents of IDPs and refugees began returning voluntarily. In the locations this report covers, this was especially evident in Yei, Pibor and, to an extent, Bentiu, although the vast majority of people there still remain in the protection of civilian (PoC) site.

The strength of this finding across localities highlights commonalities across communities in how South Sudanese perceive peace. Few make the distinction between peace as a cessation of physical violence and a more expansive view of peace that involves a restoration of predictability and capacity to make choices over long time horizons. While comprehensive peace processes address issues that may become relevant in later stages of a transitional process – such as the development of a new constitution, comprehensive economic reforms, transitional justice, and security sector reform – few citizens can envision what these elements will look like at the local level. Community perceptions of peace depend on subjective interpretations of the concept and context-specific frames of reference. In South Sudan, many communities conceive of peace as a return to a regular mode of life.

South Sudanese perceptions of peace hinge on a demand for normalization. Many research respondents described peace as a tangible state of affairs that more powerful segments of society could give or withdraw. Participants in interviews and focus groups repeatedly pleaded: “don’t take this peace away from us again.” This sentiment indicates a definition of peace as an indefinite ceasefire that serves to enable a normalization process. At the same time, the statement reflects a passivity that points towards a centralized and authoritarian political culture that permeates all layers of governance, from the center to the periphery.

With this top-down conceptualization of peace, “handshake moments” between the political leaders at the national level matter. People acknowledge these moments and perceive the broad messages. This also applies to armed actors, which explains why events in Juba can translate to subnational ceasefires. This strong interrelation between top-level elite pacts and dynamics at the local level represents a highly-centralized political culture that runs through various streams of personal and clan relations and related layers of legitimacy. With surprising regularity, research participants both recognized the importance of these handshake moments and accepted the assumption of political positions by leaders from armed factions against

which their own communities had been in conflict. This suggests that many research participants care more about whether the peace process has followed fair rules (process legitimacy) than whether the process has produced fair policy outcomes (output legitimacy).

South Sudan’s political centralization accompanies the purposeful preservation of weak state structures outside the political capital, Juba. People rely on radio programs and phone conversations for information about the peace process. Newspapers are broadly absent, particularly in rural areas. This results in diverse and contextualized perceptions of conflict, especially in areas without regular radio and mobile phone network coverage. Local politicians’ and armed group information campaigns combine with phone conversations that tie people in the periphery to relatives and friends closer to the political arena to reinforce the personalized and centralized character of South Sudanese politics. Information equals influence through a two-way street: people access a higher quality of information the closer they are to central powerholders; at the same time, information that supports the strategies of the recognized powerbrokers across the country offers others little influence to change the status quo.

Everyday peace in South Sudan: how people notice change

Communities across regions shared similar stories about what peace looks like. People frequently associate peace with free movement within and between towns and the countryside. In many areas of South Sudan, freedom of movement has improved slowly but significantly since late 2018. However, the picture remains mixed. Gunshot wounds and violent deaths remain regular events across the country. The R-ARCSS has nevertheless resulted in a significant reduction in roadside violence, including sexual violence and collectively targeted killings, throughout the country. At the same time, rural areas in the vicinity of Yei, Bentiu, Pibor and Wau remain unsafe due to looting, cattle-raiding and other facets of communal violence that continue to escalate during the dry season. For example, respondents in Pibor in early February 2020 described improvements in their ability to travel by road and exchange traders with Bor; weeks later, the same respondents experienced a surge in violence from intercommunal attacks, halting free movement.

People’s willingness to move in ways that have been impossible in previous periods of conflict connects to other peace indicators salient to participants. For example, increased freedom of movement has accompanied improvements in the range of goods available in markets,

reductions in how frequently people hear gunfire at night, resumption of cattle trading between communities, and the ability of armed fighters to move freely in towns controlled by opposing groups without engaging in fighting. Symbols of peace at the national level, such as the “handshake moments,” have motivated people to reoccupy public spaces. The manifestation of peace in everyday practices is also evident in people’s claims that they feel more willing than in the recent past to participate in social and cultural events, such as public dances, as well as conversations with other communities.

The consistency in these indicators was striking across geographic locations and groups. For example, predominantly rural Murle groups in Pibor and urban Fertit groups in Wau both saw free road movement and participation in public dances as important indicators of peace. In a diverse and politically fragile setting such as Yei, the free movement of armed actors was seen as a pivotal sign of an improvement of the situation, especially due to the significant presence of holdout groups in the region. Remarkably, respondents across the five locations wished for a functioning and strong command structure within armed groups in order to reduce further indiscipline and looting of civilian properties.

By contrast, in the politically tense environment around Bentiu and Rubkona in what is now again Unity state, research participants perceived political indicators, such as a sustainable settlement of the number of states, as the most relevant sign of a sustainable transitional process. Especially when discussing the return of the IDP population in the UN-protected PoC site outside of Bentiu (the biggest in the country, with over 120,000 inhabitants), people highlighted resolution of the states issue as the decisive factor for them to make a decision to return to their homes. Against this background, the creation of the Ruweng Administrative Area has resulted in sustained concerns among the Nuer population.

Political and socio-economic challenges in the transitional phase

Interviews and focus group discussions highlighted the urgency of issues related to federalism. The states issue is deeply divisive and risks cementing ethnopolitical fragmentation. In Bentiu town, Bentiu PoC site, and Rubkona, which are at the center of political disputes among Nuer sections, the issue of the number of states and the question of reparation for destroyed, looted or expropriated property rank high among all parts of the population. This reflects the perception of ongoing

competition among political and military elites in this region, underlined by the creation of the Ruweng Administrative Area by presidential decree on 14 February 2020. Connected to these issues, respondents in this region frequently voiced demands for reparation for lost property and expropriated land.

Similar sentiments about federal issues were common among respondents in Wau, Yei and Pibor. For example, Murle respondents in Pibor cited their fear that their community would engage in violence if their special autonomy status in Boma state or the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) was threatened. Luo, Balanda and Dinka respondents in Wau also voiced concerns about instability should national political agreements redraw county and state boundaries in a way that threatened what they perceived as fair land distributions. Indeed, Balanda traced violent conflict back to disputes in 2012 about the relocation of the county headquarters from Wau to Baggari. Respondents in Yei did not voice concerns related to the issue of social cohesion but referred to the cosmopolitan, mixed character of the city. However, they were highly aware of the political position of the so-called holdout groups to the R-ARCSS and wanted them to be included in a comprehensive peace settlement. The Rome Declaration signed with these hold-out groups was well-known among respondents and seen as critical for a peace settlement in the Yei area.

Another salient issue was tension between the national-level peace process and the often-localized character of the conflict settings, complicated by the cantonment process. National peace agreements can trigger rebel group fragmentation and the mobilization of new insurgents where minorities perceive that negotiating elites do not represent their interests. We heard explanations of SPLM-IO fragmentation and shifting allegiances where minority groups did not have direct representation in senior levels of government or the military. In these situations, collections of communities such as the Fertit may fluidly shift their support between armed factions they perceive can represent their interests indirectly. Against this background, the cantonment in some areas is perceived as enabling renewed recruitment.

Ceasefires can also increase the risk of upticks in apparent communal violence. They tend to raise the political costs of conflict at the national level, which can result in incentivizing belligerents to use community protection groups as proxies. Perhaps counter-intuitively, respondents valued a strong institutional set-up of the armed groups to keep their fighters under control and to minimize

indiscipline, looting and assaults against civilians. Policymakers can mitigate the risk of upticks in communal violence during ceasefires by investing in local stabilization measures or beginning cautious efforts at demobilization. The need for sustainable livelihood support for armed fighters inside and outside of the cantonment areas, which is required to reduce the likelihood of looting, needs to be balanced against indirectly supporting further recruitment. There is skepticism among civil society and political observers in Juba about the sustainability of the “payroll peace” approach manifest in the R-TGoNU.² In interviews outside Juba, this skepticism was less prominent and counter-balanced by general acceptance of the leaders of the two dominant armed groups in the government and opposition. While no significant expectations beyond safeguarding the ceasefire have been raised at a broader scale, it is likely that issues such as reparation, justice and socio-economic development will return at later stages of the transitional process when the permanent ceasefire has proved sustainable.

¹ Alex de Waal, Alan Boswell, David Deng, Rachel Ibreck, Matthew Benson, and Jan Pospisil, *South Sudan: The Politics of Delay*, Conflict Research Programme and Political Settlements Research Programme Memo, 3 December 2019.

Tasks for the transitional period

Donors and peace mediators can safeguard stability by supporting national peace agreements that protect subnational agreements. Due to the complex interrelation between the fault lines of the “big” conflict and the multiplicity of localized conflict settings, to endure, national-level agreements require an infrastructure of regional and local conflict management initiatives. When local agreements threaten national pacts, and vice versa, the likelihood of violence increases.

Support to safeguard the security situation on the ground is pivotal as well. This is a challenging task, since traditional manoeuvres such as disarmament campaigns are not realistic in an environment where neither law enforcement, nor the army, nor UNMISS can reliably take on the role of guaranteeing public safety across the country. The role of South Sudanese humanitarian and peacebuilding actors in supporting subnational conflict management is crucial. International actors must balance providing support without undermining the legitimacy of these efforts.

Finally, a long-term perspective on the South Sudanese transition requires a shift away from elite politics to a focus on socio-economic development. While the payroll peace at the national level may represent a trade-off that avoids further armed fighting, it is unlikely to sustain a broader transitional process. In the long run, the R-TGoNU elite pact is unlikely to ease South Sudan’s development process.

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