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Voting in turmoil

South Sudan is due to hold its first elections this year. However, the ballot threatens to be overshadowed by violence — should it take place at all

At last, in December 2024, the citizens of South Sudan, which gained independence in 2011, are supposed to be able to elect their political representatives. Yet, whether a ballot is indeed going to come to pass this time round is uncertain. Previous plans for elections first fell victim to two civil wars and then to endless delays in the implementation of the 2018 peace accord. In August 2022, the signatories resolved to extend the five-year transitional phase under an appointed Government of National Unity by two years to complete pending tasks prescribed by the agreement. Too much still had to be done ahead of general elections and the eventual swearing in of an elected government, such as drawing up a new constitution, uniting the former adversaries in a national army and conducting a census.

Less than nine months to the election date, the government has made hardly any progress with important steps despite the extension. While the election commission was finally reconstituted, resources are still lacking. In most of the ten states, the election commission has no working offices, let alone staff. The constitutional process is only gradually gaining momentum. There is no voter-register. Constituency boundaries have yet to be drawn – an undertaking of massive conflict potential in a country in which violent and often deadly conflicts are still shaping the lives of many citizens, even after the signing of the peace accord. Millions remain displaced, many are still living in camps or neighbouring countries. The election law adopted last year poses plenty of challenges – including errors and inconsistencies calculating the number of legislative mandates. Conducting a vote under this legal framework is not feasible. Nonetheless, no efforts have yet been made to resubmit the law to parliament.

Vary of predictability

South Sudan's partners are losing patience. More so, given the number of

crises elsewhere in the continent and globally, the resources they are willing or able to provide to support the government in the sluggish implementation of the peace accord are dwindling. Especially the young state's midwife, the US, primarily sees the problem in a lack of leaders' political will.

Publicly, international partners commonly express their desire to see elections according to schedule. Privately, many prefer a further postponement. Too great is the concern that elections could trigger an escalation of violence, or even a new civil war. At the same time, partners want to keep up the pressure on the government to fully implement the peace accord. Against this background, when the mandate of the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was up for renewal in mid-March, the Security Council only extended it unaltered until the end of April in a technical roll-over. An in-depth review of the mandate was to follow once the head of the peace mission delivers his report on the status of preparations for the elections in early April.

By now however, the debate on the feasibility of a vote in December and alternative scenarios has already gained momentum in Juba. Given the lack of progress on pending tasks, the international commission monitoring the peace accord, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanism (R-JMEC), called on the parties to the accord to either agree on reduced conditions for holding elections or to postpone the elections. In both cases, a renegotiation of the peace accord is required. In response, the opposition called for an externally mediated inter-party dialogue. The ruling party, on the other hand, suggested electing only the president and the governors of the states this year and postponing legislative elections till next year. This might be interpreted as a show of good will to finally get on with the elections while circumnavigating the challenges of missing constituency boundaries and seats in parliament.

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Yet, there is hardly any doubt that President Salva Kiir Mayardit would win the elections. Executive elections would not only make an already overly powerful president even stronger, but might aggravate the immense potential for violence in the (election) campaign for the governors' seats. Furthermore, it is hard to gauge the incentives an executive legitimised by elections would have to conduct further ballots. This is another reason why the opposition is unlikely to get on board with the proposal. It is more likely that a new round of negotiations

between the parties to the accord will be initiated, while all elections will be postponed.

At this stage, even with the best of intentions and legal acrobatics, it would probably be difficult for the government to hold any elections in December. In addition to all the logistical, institutional and legal challenges, severe damage to the pipeline delivering South Sudan's oil to world markets has further complicated the situation. Against the background of the current war in Sudan, experts don't expect the pipeline to be repaired in the coming months. More than 90 per cent of South Sudan's state budget depends on oil revenues. Even though hardly any of this contributes to the provision of public goods, disastrous economic and political impacts are to be anticipated – unless a benefactor is found who is willing to at least temporarily make up for the losses without demanding accountability for expenditures. Otherwise the President will struggle to halt the currency free fall and to continue to keep rebelling commanders and political rivals at bay. The dollar exchange rate of the South Sudan pound already dropped from 900 SSP at the beginning of the year to a present 2,100 SSP.

Even in the best circumstances, holding elections in the conflict-torn country would be an immense challenge. In the international community's youngest member state, even rudimentary infrastructure hardly exists, millions have fled their homes, and institutions with key roles in an electoral process, such as the election commission and the judiciary, have neither adequate resources nor substantial experience to draw on. In order to prevent a deepening of social and political rifts in the course of the election process, dedicated continuous and frank efforts to achieve a political consensus among the parties to the accord that has the support of wide sections of the population are essential. Only a broad-based societal and political agreement on the prerequisites and rules for South Sudan's first elections can prevent new violence and bring the young state a step further towards democracy.



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