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South Sudan's Civil War Will Not End with a Peace Deal

Lotje de Vries and Mareike Schomerus

In early 2017, the government of South Sudan declared that parts of the country had been hit by severe famine. This famine was another sign of the many ways in which a disastrous war was killing people. South Sudan had at that point been in a civil war for three years, with the humanitarian situation steadily deteriorating since war broke out in December 2013. The governing Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its army, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), had split following a long-brewing political conflict. In the first few days of the war, political rivalry had turned into fierce fighting; killings were targeted along ethnic lines. President Salva Kiir remained in charge of the government and the national army, while a coalition of military commanders headed by former Vice President Riek Machar became the SPLM-in Opposition (SPLM-iO).

The first scrambled international efforts after fighting started supported a quick, but unsuccessful, ceasefire. After one and a half years of negotiations, and pressure applied by the international community, government and opposition signed the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) in August 2015, which stipulated that the two warring parties would share power in government. What was intended as a peace deal, however, continues to make South Sudan more violent as despite the agreement, violence continues to spread.

In July 2016, renewed fighting between the forces of the government and the SPLM-iO forced opposition leader Machar to flee the country. The United Nations (UN) has since accused the government of preparing genocide. And yet, the international community, the government, and parts of the opposition

also continue to tout the ARCSS as the appropriate framework to work toward peace in South Sudan, and preparations are made for a national dialogue. How should we understand the paradox of a signed deal and talks of reconciliation on the one hand, and an ever-deteriorating situation on the other? And how are citizens experiencing this contradiction?

A good starting point is to examine what concessions the international community, the government, and the opposition had to make to enable the negotiation of an agreement. A significant trade-off—the one on which we will focus here—is how the actors framed the causes of the conflict. A few interpretations stand out. They shape the narrative of what causes violence in South Sudan. But by giving simplified versions they obstruct, rather than construct, the road toward peace in South Sudan.

When fighting started in 2013, one explanation for what was going on quickly became dominant: That this was a competition over political leadership fought out along ethnic lines. Particularly framing the violence as "ethnic" or a "tribal war"—because it was driven by two competing groups of Dinka and Nuer people—served as a ready-made, seemingly familiar explanation for the new violence in a young country that commentators, politicians, donors, and other actors could easily deploy.

Scholars have long argued that naming a war gives it the meaning and significance with which it will be fought and remembered. In the South Sudanese case, portraying the conflict as being between two ethnic groups also determined which steps were taken toward a solution. The suggestion of the tribal war, and the image of a bifurcated conflict this created led to two interpretations of the violence. These views of the violence shaped the nature of the internationally sponsored peace deal.

The first of these Manichean interpretations of the conflict is that group one—the Dinka-led government—is more legitimate than the opposition forces because it represents formal sovereign power. The international political system of nation-states partly explains why international actors focus on sovereignty. This interpretation, however, fails to account for the fact that many of those now in the opposition forces held government positions before the president relieved them from their duties. The second interpretation is that the SPLA-iO—seemingly Nuer-led—comprehensively represents all antigovernment grievances.

One consequence of labeling this war as a conflict between two groups—with the suggestion that everyone in South Sudan falls into one of the two camps—is that the different forms of violence that the country is experiencing are part of this bifurcated civil war. This would suggest that the best way to stop the violence in South Sudan is to get the government and the SPLM-iO to strike a deal. The path that the international community has taken is to: first, engage with the government; second, treat opposition

grievances as representative of all South Sudanese; third, interpret any violence in South Sudan as being connected to the conflict between government and opposition; and fourth, focus on implementing a peace deal that focuses on government and opposition.

But it is unlikely that this approach will bring peace to South Sudan. Interpreting South Sudan's violence as a conflict between two warring parties fails to acknowledge the less visible forms of violence and oppression that South Sudanese experience every day. These less visible forms of violence existed well before this war started, and need to be addressed. The spotlight on the two warring parties and how to bring them together also subdues those voices and forces in society that try to stay away from the violence, while seeking alternative ways to have their grievances heard. The failure to understand that other types of violence and oppression makes South Sudan a brutal country for those living in it, and the disregard for the attempts to improve their situations contributes to making the situation worse.

The distinction between the government as the "legitimate" power and the "rebels" as the illegitimate challengers of a sovereign power may well be correct from an international relations' perspective, but is in practice fictitious. The government and the international community continue to view the opposition forces as "rebels," even though most of the opposition leadership used to be part of the government or the army establishment, and only became opposition after being dismissed by the president—most prominently then vice-president Machar. Others decided to join the opposition after the first troubles in the army barracks and subsequent ethnically motivated killings in December 2013.

Although many donors have now stopped providing any aid that is not humanitarian to the South Sudanese government, they continue to engage with the government to maintain space for the peace process. When opposition leader Machar fled the country in July 2016, the government, keen to be seen as adhering to the peace agreement, replaced Machar with another opposition figure, Taban Deng Gai. The international community felt obliged to go along with this move because contesting the appointment would mean that the peace process had reached its end. The international community thus had to work with the new vice-president who now remains as the nominal representative of the opposition in government.

Through this engagement, the international community acknowledges the government's sovereign powers. International actors are obliged to abide by the government's rules. The UN mission is, for example, often prevented from visiting places where violence occurred. Being treated as the legitimate government by the international community means that the president and his colleagues maintain the upper hand in the war that they themselves have created.

While there are many arguments in support of continuing to work with the government, and to treat the opposition representative as legitimate, the current engagement fails to acknowledge one major flaw: many South Sudanese see little difference between the president and the people who are violently opposing the government. They thus cannot understand how supporting a power-sharing agreement between the two warring parties will bring peace and better living conditions to the many corners of South Sudan.

In our countless conversations with South Sudanese over the past years, we learned that both the government and the opposition are widely seen as being opposed to peace. To many South Sudanese, replacing Riek Machar with Taban Deng Gai fully discredited a peace agreement that never seemed like a deal between the government and its opponents. This is because those who took up weapons—whether on behalf of the government or the opposition—are seen by most as members of the same political–military elite who use violence to settle their internal issues.

Particularly in the Equatorian region—the southern part of the country where we did most of our research—government and opposition are viewed as being only interested in the consolidation of their own power, regardless of the costs. This perception has consequences. It means that citizens neither place a high value on calls for peace by the government, nor do they trust the armed opposition's calls for an end to violence.

The interpretation that the opposition represents antigovernment grievances of all South Sudanese is equally misleading, and thus limits the possibilities for peace. In the first two years of the war, people in the more peaceful areas certainly felt the economic and political impact of the war. But most of the people we spoke to considered the conflict between the SPLM and the SPLM-iO as none of their business. This was a battle among the elite, and ordinary citizens did not believe that either side would want to address issues of concern to ordinary citizens. While many people articulated long-held grievances that they wanted the government to address, joining the conflict on the side of either party was not something that most people we spoke to were even considering.

That citizens tried to avoid being drawn into the conflict stands in stark contrast to how the government dealt with the grievances of ordinary South Sudanese. A familiar pattern has been to accuse anyone who expresses criticism of the government as being a rebel opponent. Framing legitimate grievances as threatening sovereign power is a useful tool for a government: it allows government soldiers to violently oppress or intimidate those the government accuses of being rebels. Rather than embracing the complexity of the grievances and seeking complex solutions on the local level and with many different actors, the Manichean interpretation of the causes of conflict and its protagonists facilitates international actors to focus their peace

efforts on government and opposition and on the center of power in the capital, Juba.

One example of a local grievance with a long history is that farmers see their crops destroyed by cattle in need of grazing. Most often these conflicts between farming and pastoralism peak in the dry season and subside when the rains come. With the start of the civil war, however, farmers in the Equatorian region have seen their crops destroyed by cattle, as herders and their animals sought refuge from the fighting in other parts of the country. Herders from elsewhere often came heavily armed and failed to respect local customs on transit corridors, seasonal limitations, and other arrangements to ease tensions between farmers and pastoralist.

Many Equatorians ascribed the behavior of the herdsmen to their close relationship with political and military leaders in Juba. For instance, the local traditional and political elite in a former Western Equatorian County, Mundri, insisted that problems with cattle keepers were part of a larger plan by the national government to evict them from their farmland. At the same time, they continued to try their own ways of mediating between cattle keepers and farmers to avoid further violence. It has become increasingly dangerous, however, for people to express their frustrations since the government publicly labels such criticism as support for the violent opposition and uses those labels to justify violent crackdowns on populations.

Yes, these tensions exist between farmers and cattle herders in the Equatorias. But testy relationships among people whose livelihoods are at odds with each other are not the same thing as war. Mixing up those two contributes to a deteriorating situation. With local authorities attempting to protect their people, and the national government accusing its citizens of rallying to join the armed opposition, local political stability suffers and people increasingly fear their national government. Pressured to declare loyalty to one side or the other, local authorities and ordinary people feel cornered.

Thus, the underlying problems of clashing livelihoods remain unresolved, while the government accuses those caught up in these tensions of being disloyal. Frustration and the need for physical protection can propel people, particularly young men, to respond to violence with violence. Still, many young men who were respondents in our research had no intention of playing a part in the war at all—neither for government, nor for the opposition or a third force. Fighting to protect livelihoods and people is different from joining the army or the armed opposition in a war in which few see much sense, and in which government and opposition forces kill, abuse, and displace people every day.

Our research finds that while people tried hard to stay away from violence, they also found out that, to have their grievances heard in a peace process supported by the international community, they need to speak the

language of war. The paradox of a war that is labeled as being between two groups is that although many people try hard to avoid being drawn into the violence, becoming part of the war is increasingly seen as the only option to ensure that grievances are heard.

The interpretation of the government as legitimate and the opposition as being the voice to express all grievances has been very influential in how the "solution" was designed. Particularly, international efforts were driven by the fear that unless a quick peace deal was reached between the government and the opposition, war would spread to other parts of South Sudan. With the peace process failing and violence occurring in parts of South Sudan that had previously been peaceful—such as the Equatorian region—this fear seemed justified.

And yet, there is another complicated mechanism at play here: focusing peacemaking efforts on government and opposition while searching for signs of the spread of war and for brewing rebellions has resulted in bringing more people into the violence. The power-sharing agreement that was signed in August 2015 does not sufficiently acknowledge—let alone offer solutions to—grievances like the absence of services, the violence between pastoralist and farmers, the longing for meaningful decentralization and inclusive governance. Instead, the approach to peace has confirmed the dawning realization of many South Sudanese that solutions to local grievances will only come through a place at the negotiation table. Getting such a place can only be achieved through violence. That is one reason why now even the more stable parts of the country have become violent.

Thus, the notion that a quick deal between two warring parties will bring long-term peace is profoundly misleading. Rather, such a peace deal could make it more difficult to make peace in South Sudan as it highlights the extent to which the elites in government and opposition control everyone else. South Sudanese have seen that war makes bad conditions even worse for all, but that the current flawed peace agreements also brings little benefit to most of them. Such a realization points to a dangerously unstable future for a South Sudan that relies on international help to consolidate the power of elites.

Searching for quick and yet comprehensive solutions, international and regional mediators tend to overlook the crucial difference between cause and consequence of violence. After three years of confusing local issues with elite fighting, while at the same time refusing to acknowledge that war affects everyone—even those living in peaceful areas—peace in South Sudan is now increasingly difficult to imagine. Because neither government nor opposition are seen by the Sudanese people to be legitimate, or representing the desire

of the people to live in peace, many citizens consider power sharing—which continues to frame the thinking within the peace process—as short-sighted at best. Instead, our respondents stressed the importance of exploring alternatives for managing tensions and relationships and avoiding violence, for instance through local mediation, dialogue, and federalism. So how would these alternative approaches translate into a more meaningful broader peace process? If the solution to political tensions and local conflicts does not lie in a power-sharing agreement between government and opposition, what wo uld a solution look like?

Working toward peace requires finding ways to avoid binary narratives, including in interpretations of local conflicts as being trickle-down versions of a fight within the political and military elite. This means that the government, the opposition, and the international community need to acknowledge that the entire country is affected by the war, and that there are many more parties involved than only the government on the one hand and the—already divided—opposition on the other. Most importantly, local conflicts and legitimate grievances are not to be considered a secondary matter that will resolve if tensions at the center of power are managed. Leaving these grievances aside in the current peace agreement greatly contributed to its failure, the spread of violence, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. What will help make South Sudan peaceful is finding ways to deal with local conflicts and allowing the expression of multilayered grievances of many different groups and individuals. The elites have proven that peace is not what they strive for—so attention needs to be paid to those people who crave for a peaceful and a more just South Sudan.

The label of the war as between two groups makes finding other solutions harder. Yet no one wants to be held hostage by a few political or military leaders who negotiate about war and peace, but who act on the war side of that imagined divide. International engagement needs to free itself from this. Peacemaking interventions need to shift from trying to save a largely dead power-sharing deal. Instead it is necessary to look at how people affected by conflicts imagine new ways of managing their relationships outside the framework of an elite-led or ethnic civil war. Only a peace process that considers the many different groups, lived experiences, and shared grievances can deliver the peace that South Sudan needs.

ORCID

Lotje de Vries http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7766-6033
Mareike Schomerus http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1258-3613

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Lotje de Vries is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology of Development and Change Group at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. E-mail: lotje.devries@wur.nl

Mareike Schomerus is a Senior Research Fellow in Politics and Governance at the Overseas Development Institute in London, UK. E-mail: m.schomerus@odi.org