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Research Brief

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Local dimensions of conflict, governance and the political marketplace in South Sudan

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Issue

In South Sudan, Juba matters, but it is just one seat of power and contestation; the spatial and temporal variation of conflict and governance across the rest of the country equally demands to be understood. The significance of this dynamic is underscored by the agreements made in February and June 2020 between South Sudan's warring parties - the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS), the Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) - regarding the (re)division of the country into ten states, and which party would be allocated the right to nominate a governor for each of the ten states, giving that party de facto control of the state itself.¹ These agreements came after years of contention, since the GRSS unilaterally decreed that the country be subdivided into 28 and then 32 states, to the protest of many.² The issue has remained vexed throughout the conflict and was a key sticking point during negotiations for the R-ARCSS³ 2018 peace deal, as this agreement determines the demarcation and allocation of power and shapes the use of violence across the country.

Research Background

This research brief outlines some of the dynamics of local conflict and governance through the recent civil war across South Sudan, based on research undertaken in five 'case study' locations: Gogrial, Malakal, Leer, Nimule, and Abyei. It provides analysis regarding the likely nature of governance and conflict across the country as it proceeds with the R-ARCSS implementation and beyond. The findings in this brief are drawn from a full Conflict Research Programme (CRP) report: *The War(s) in South Sudan: local dynamics of conflict, governance, and the political marketplace*. The research utilises findings from a larger CRP project, employing a comparative political ethnography approach, co-designed by a team of CRP researchers,⁴ and implemented by South Sudanese researchers embedded in the locations. The analysis draws upon a combined total of 343 interviews, observation reports, and transcripts, gathered between April 2018 and September 2019. While there are certain limitations to this research, the data provides detailed snapshots of perspectives at the community level, which have been interpreted alongside participant-observations, deliberations, and joint analyses undertaken by the wider CRP team, using the lens of the CRP's two interlocking framings: 'public authority' and the 'political marketplace' (See Box 1).

1 Al Jazeera (2020) South Sudan leaders reach key deal on control of states. 17 June.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/south-sudan-leaders-reach-key-deal-control-states-200617162203652.html>

2 The SPLA-IO, South Sudanese civil society and international partners opposed this decree.

3 Revitalised-Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan.

4 The research was co-designed by Rachel Ibreck, Naomi Pendle, and Hannah Logan. The South Sudanese researchers formed the Bridge Network in November 2017. The team met annually for joint analysis between 2017-2020, including with Flora McCrone and Matthew Benson in January 2020.

Box 1

Public Authority: Public authority is a widely applicable term when seeking to understand the functioning of power and institutions in Africa. The term refers to both organisations and actors that are outwardly 'political' or 'government,' but also those that are ostensibly neither, and yet still participate in the negotiation of power and governance.

Political Marketplace: in South Sudan, 'political marketplace' refers to the gaining and maintaining of power, based upon a "speeded up, dollarised mode of transactional politics," in which it's nascent state-level institutions are subordinate to bargaining for political gain among a narrow group of elites.

Research Findings

Evident through this research was that, while public authority – both formal and informal – and political marketplace dynamics, varied considerably across the five research sites, a number of important commonalities also emerged in some or all locations, regarding their evolving roles through the conflict(s) and relationships with South Sudan's centre of power.

1. The civil war since 2013 has provided a vehicle for localised violent conflicts over land, business, and natural resources. In the second Sudanese civil war, it was expected that resolving the 'problem' with the north would resolve the conflict. In the recent war, that assumption has shifted to focus on resolving the problem in Juba. But as this research has made clear, there is no singular 'war in South Sudan' that radiates out of Juba. Rather, the 'peripheries' across the country are bound up with a conflict rooted in the politics of the centre but also in their own localised conflicts. Resolving these will take a lot more than just the R-ARCSS – however, an alternative forum has not been proposed under the agreement.
2. Gubernatorial conflict emerged as a major conflict driver in recent years. At the time of writing, final decisions around the allocation of certain states to the warring parties and their appointments for the governors' role, were still in question. In the near future, we should anticipate that such decisions could precipitate tension or violent conflict and ongoing contestation. Nonetheless, the warring parties' recent agreement to restore the ten-states system, rather than pursuing subdivision into 28 or 32 or more states, could arguably contribute to the non-violent resolution of conflict. Further administrative sub-division risks contributing to a new wave of conflict, over the demarcation of new boundaries, as well as further diluting the public authority and stretching the availability of public goods for effective local governance. The research suggests that further decentralisation proposals in the future should be carefully monitored with an eye on the extent to which it contributes to violent conflict.
3. On the other hand, we have also seen that decentralised governance even under South Sudan's ten-state system still holds a number of significant violent conflict triggers and creates a climate in which the political marketplace can flourish or become further embedded locally. In future, the introduction of local electoral politics planned under the R-ARCSS, will likely add another layer of local contestation. Based on these findings, one mitigation strategy for this would be to attempt to de-link local governance units and positions from particular 'ethnic fiefdoms', to prevent the further sectarianisation of local politics.
4. South Sudan's chiefs and other local governance actors are often highly militarised and politicised and have participated directly in conflict, through the recruitment of local youth into armed groups or the coordination of attacks on neighbouring communities. Moreover, the public authority and legitimacy of chiefs and other local actors has been severely degraded in recent years. Much local peace-building work to date has emphasised working with chiefs as a blanket approach, who are seen as the most legitimate and capable partners through which external organisations can do peace work at the community level. The CRP's research suggests that South Sudan's peace-building partners should recognise the complexity and potentially problematic nature of working with some actors, looking to other forms of public authorities to engage in peacebuilding work: teachers, local journalists, and other actors could be considered alternative suitable peace partners.
5. A contemporary strain of elite-driven cattle conflict is becoming a key symptom of the political marketplace. That is, wealthy elites - in the government and military, based in Juba and elsewhere - belonging to some cattle-keeping communities attempt to foment land-based conflict in order to expand their cattle herds, grazing land, and territorial control, coordinating and mobilising conflict using cash, mobile phones, and social media. However, the role of elites, money, and technology and other 'outside' or urban influences within these conflicts remains under-examined. In the absence of in-depth context analysis, outsiders have commonly assumed that localised conflict is simply 'traditional' and 'inter-communal,' leading external partners to undertake traditional approaches of local peace meetings which, in the case of such variants of conflict, will be at best ineffective and at worst may feed into the conflict by providing legitimacy or resources to problematic actors. The priority therefore with emerging 'local' conflicts is first to analyse, because poorly formulated peace-building efforts will likely be ineffectual or could even worsen the conflict.

6. The conflict dynamics described above could also play into processes of political decentralisation, in that land-based conflicts and efforts for territorial control (often involving cattle and herders) will be exacerbated by disputes over administrative boundaries and attempts to gain territorial control over new administrative units. Again, real-time research and analysis into the shifting interests over land and territory, that keeps abreast of the ongoing implementation of the R-ARCSS, will be necessary in order to understand and respond to emerging 'local' conflicts.
7. South Sudan's colonial experience, and subsequently the first and second civil wars, drove a tribalisation or sectarianisation of communities; propagating this version of community identity served as a means for conflicting elites to invoke legitimacy and influence, in lieu of providing more tangible public resources. In this context, through the first two civil wars, the ethnic affiliations of the conflicts' leaders became a powerful means to invoke the support of communities. However, this research tentatively indicates that in locations which have produced some of South Sudan's most senior leaders, the ethnic affiliation of their home communities, and the once-powerful narrative of 'liberation,' appear to hold increasingly less sway among communities, in the absence of public service provision by the GRSS. We might expect to see that, as the GRSS and its citizenry matures, communities' expectations of public service provision will likely increase, leading to greater dissatisfaction with government. In this light, the research suggests that fostering future stability will require concerted efforts by South Sudan to improve the GRSS' capacity for public service provision.
8. Relatedly, stark inequalities have been produced by decades of conflict and the burgeoning elite-dominated political marketplace. 'Peace' following the CPA resulted in huge dividends for a small handful of elites, but very little for communities, which continue to exist in a state of chronic underdevelopment. External partners need to find other ways to make local peacebuilding 'stick,' which should focus on addressing these deep inequalities produced by the burgeoning elite-dominated political marketplace. For a future, more robust peace, the living circumstances of ordinary communities must be improved. The research indicates that coupling peace-building efforts with more tangible dividends - infrastructure programming or enforceable local contracts over resources - creates the credible incentive.



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