SOUTH SUDAN

Perceptions of Peace, Marginalization and Elections in Yei

Findings from a Series of National Opinion Polls in South Sudan

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Acronyms

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
CIESIN	Center for International Earth Science Information Network
EPI	Everyday Peace Indicator
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
GRID3	Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority for Development
NAS	National Salvation Front
PeaceRep	Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
R-TGONU	Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army
SPLM-FDs	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-Former Detainees
SPLM-IG	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Government
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

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Summary

► As one of the locations where political violence continues to pose a major threat, Yei County provides important insights into conflict trends and their impacts on citizen perceptions of peace in South Sudan.

► Despite ongoing violence in and around Yei, opinion polling data indicates an improvement in security conditions in recent years. Forty-one percent of respondents in Yei felt safe in 2023, up from just six percent in 2021. Notably, there are significant gender differences in perceptions of safety, with male respondents expressing far lower levels of safety than female respondents.

► Perceptions of peace more generally have also evolved over time. Eighty-one percent of respondents in Yei said that South Sudan was not at peace — more than twice the national average of 36 percent. However, there has been a dramatic change over time with the number of respondents in Yei saying that South Sudan is at peace increasing fivefold from just eight percent in 2021 to 40 percent in 2023.

► The survey data shows a sense of marginalization and political alienation among respondents in Yei. Only 15 percent of respondents in Yei thought that the national government cared about their community. Gender disparities were also evident, with men being considerably more likely to believe that the national government did not care about their community than women. While most respondents in Yei (70%) expressed happiness with South Sudan's secession, nearly 1 in 5 were not happy with it.

► This sentiment was also apparent in weak support for the ruling SPLM party. Only 12 percent of respondents in Yei believed that the SPLM (referred to as SPLM-IG in the survey) had the best vision for the country, compared to 15 percent who preferred the National Salvation Front (NAS). Twenty-two percent of respondents answered, 'none of the above [parties]', and 23 percent declined to answer the question. This diversity of political viewpoints suggests that Yei may be among the hotly contested constituencies in elections currently scheduled for the end of 2024.

► Across survey locations, respondents expressed fear of election-related violence, with 61 percent of respondents in the 2023 poll assessing the risk as 'very high' or 'somehow high'. However, in Yei, there has been a 20-percentage point drop in the perceived risk of election-related violence in recent years, with 48 percent of respondents viewing the risk as 'very high' or 'somehow high' in 2023 compared to 68 percent in 2021.

► Despite the perceived risk, a majority of respondents in Yei (54%) still preferred for elections to be held in December 2024. Support for holding elections on time rose to 66 percent among respondents that viewed the risk of election-related violence to be low, suggesting that if security conditions continue to improve, more people may endorse the idea of holding of elections on time.

► The overall trend in improving security conditions – albeit unevenly felt and marginal in some locations – is a noteworthy achievement in a peace process that has otherwise been mired in delays and violations of ceasefire agreements. Policymakers should redouble their efforts to secure a political settlement among armed actors in Yei as they work to promote reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience programming in the area. Maintaining citizen confidence in the peace process is a critical component of these broader objectives.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the civil war in South Sudan has passed through several stages. The initial phase witnessed intense fighting in Juba and throughout the Greater Upper Nile region, as government and opposition forces competed for control over territory. The signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in August 2015 provided a brief respite before its collapse in April 2016. The conflict subsequently spread to previously stable parts of Greater Equatoria and Greater Bahr-el-Ghazal, resulting in the fragmentation of government and opposition forces, and the emergence of new armed opposition groups in different parts of the country. The signing of a 'revitalized' peace agreement in 2018 marked the beginning of a third phase, where the overall security situation improved, but high levels of violence persist at the subnational level.

Yei County offers valuable insights into these conflict trends and their impact on citizen perceptions of peace. As one of the locations where political violence remains a significant threat, the situation in Yei illustrates the complex interplay between political agendas at the national level and local conflict driven by historical grievances and perceived marginalization. The movement of armed cattle-keepers into southern Central Equatoria in recent years has further complicated matters and shown how competition over natural resources can easily become intertwined with political violence. Nonetheless, as the opinion polling data shows, improvements in perceptions of peace and safety are still evident. Policymakers should take note of these trends as they usher South Sudan through this particularly challenging point in its transition, with national elections scheduled for the end of 2024.

This policy brief explores these issues, drawing on a series of four opinion polls conducted between 2021 and 2023 by Detcro and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep). The polls captured the views of 13,325 people from 15 counties across all 10 states and one special administrative area, encompassing urban, rural and IDP camp environments.[1] Respondents were asked questions about their daily experiences of safety based on indicators of everyday peace developed through qualitative research during the project's inception phase.[2] They also shared their views on a wide range of governance and security topics, including the prospect of national elections.[3]

Evolving Perceptions of Peace and Safety

The civil war reached Yei in 2016 after the collapse of the ARCSS. The resulting fighting caused massive displacement, with over a million South Sudanese fleeing to Uganda alone by August 2017, making it the largest exodus of refugees in Africa since the 1994 Rwandan genocide.[4]

Figure 1: Number of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda [2013-23]
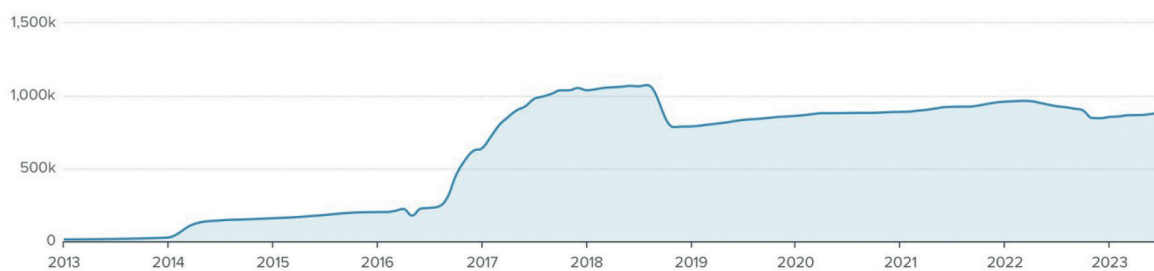
Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website, citing Office of the Prime Minister in Uganda, available at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/southsudan/location/1925.

In early 2017, Thomas Cirillo, the deputy chief of staff in the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), defected from the military and founded an armed opposition group called the National Salvation Front (NAS). NAS was one of several armed groups that emerged after the collapse of the peace agreement as the civil war spread to southern parts of Central Equatoria State and other previously stable parts of South Sudan (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Timeline showing emergence of armed groups in South Sudan

Source: ISS, Compound Fractures, https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/ear-21-1.pdf.

In mid-2017, the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) facilitated another push for peace in South Sudan resulting in the signing of a cessation of hostilities agreement in December 2017, a permanent ceasefire in June 2018 and the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018. While Cirillo expressed commitment to the December 2017 cessation of hostilities, NAS and several other opposition groups refused to sign the R-ARCSS, and conflict persisted in Yei and other parts of Central Equatoria. Clashes among the various armed groups continued into 2019, with NAS gradually gaining the upper hand over the SPLM-IO in Central Equatoria.[5] Currently, the SPLM-IO presence is limited to a few payams in the region and their forces are hampered by internal divisions along ethnolinguistic lines.

Negotiations between the government and non-signatories to the R-ARCSS started in 2019, facilitated by the Rome-based Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio, leading to the signing of another cessation of hostilities agreement called the Rome Declaration in January 2020.[6] In February 2020, the SPLM-IO joined the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU), officially marking the start of the transitional period.

Despite ongoing violence in and around Yei, opinion polling data indicates an improvement in security conditions in recent years. Most respondents in Yei pointed to the height of the conflict in 2016 and 2017 as the years that had the most fighting between communities in the area (see Figure 3). The improving security situation is evident in the influx of returnees from refugee camps in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), although push factors in terms of reduced rations in refugee camps, difficulties accessing land and tensions between refugees and host communities factor more prominently in people's decision to return.[7] An assessment by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that there were 83,844 returnees in Yei as of March 2023.[8]

Figure 3: Since the war broke out in December 2013, in which year has there been the most amount of conflict between communities in this area? [2022, Yei only, n = 195]
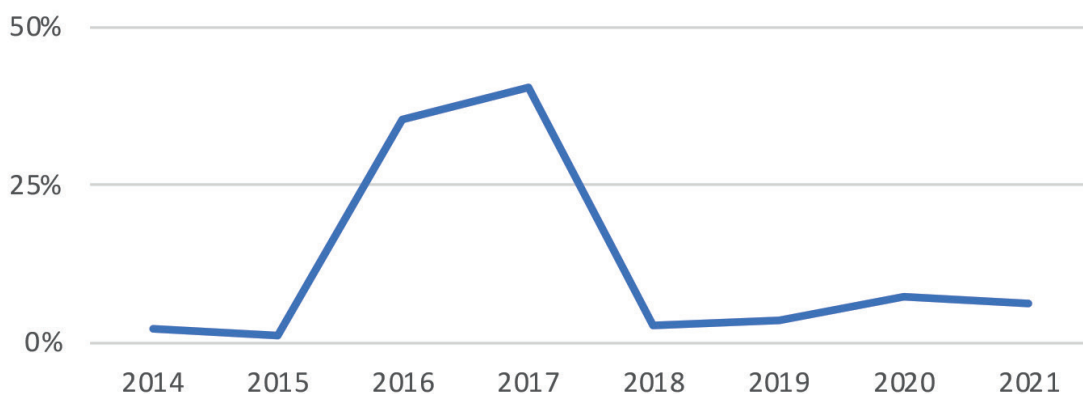

The composite EPI scores also show an improving sense of safety in Yei, albeit less pronounced than many other survey locations. Forty-one percent of respondents in Yei felt safe in 2023, up from just six percent in 2021. Notably, there are significant gender differences in perceptions of safety, with male respondents expressing far lower levels of perceived safety than women (see Figure 4). These differences may be attributed to the specific risks that men face in active combat situations, including forced recruitment, as well as the risks that male returnees face when they come to Yei to secure their homes and livelihoods before their families join them. As the situation in Yei stabilized, the perceived risk among men decreased dramatically, from 80 percent in 2021 to 39 percent in 2023 (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: Changes in perceptions of safety among men and women in Yei [2021-23, n = 838]*
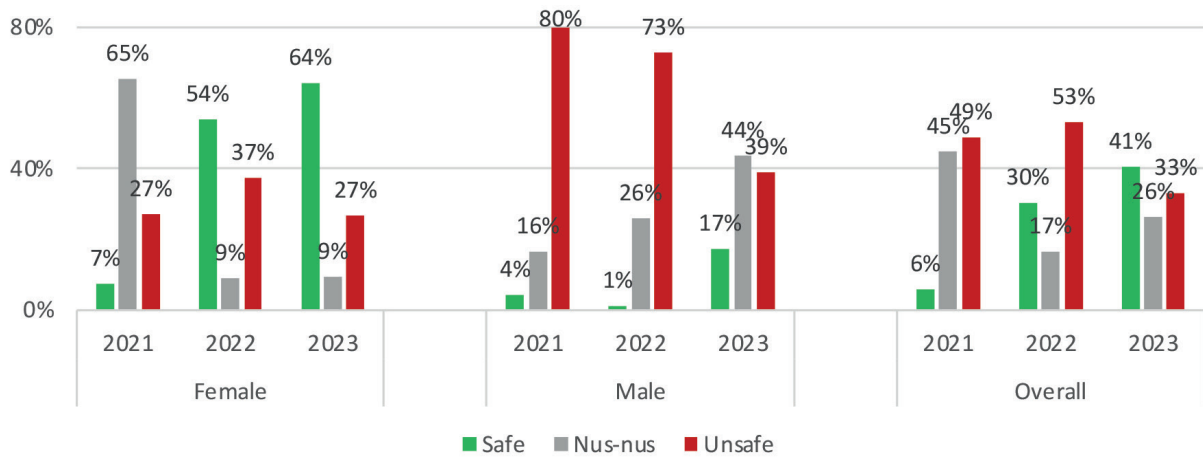

* 'Nus-nus translates as 'half-half' or 'neither safe nor unsafe' in Juba Arabic.

Figure 5: Levels of safety among men and women in Yei [2021-23, n = 838]
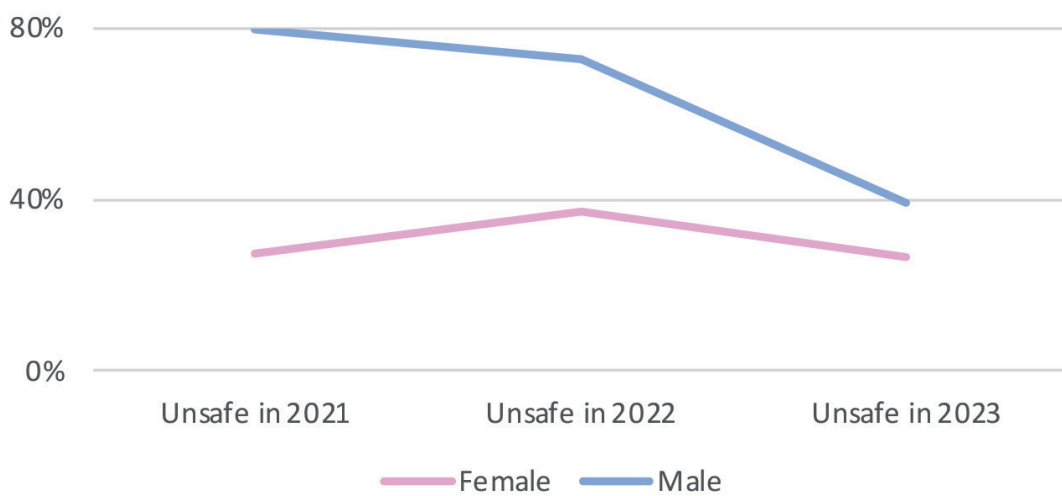
Perceptions of peace more generally have also evolved over time. Yei had some of the lowest perceptions of peace of all the survey locations, with 81 percent [n = 838] of respondents in Yei saying that South Sudan was not at peace across the four waves of data collection — more than twice the national average of 36 percent [n = 13,293]. However, there has been a dramatic change over time with the number of respondents in Yei saying that South Sudan is at peace increasing fivefold from just 8 percent in 2021 to 40 percent in 2023. However, gender disparities are also apparent in these findings, with men being almost three times as likely to say South Sudan is at peace in 2023 as women. These findings are somewhat counterintuitive considering the higher levels of perceived safety among women as compared to men.

Figure 6: 'Is South Sudan at peace?' By Gender [Yei only, 2021-23, n = 838]
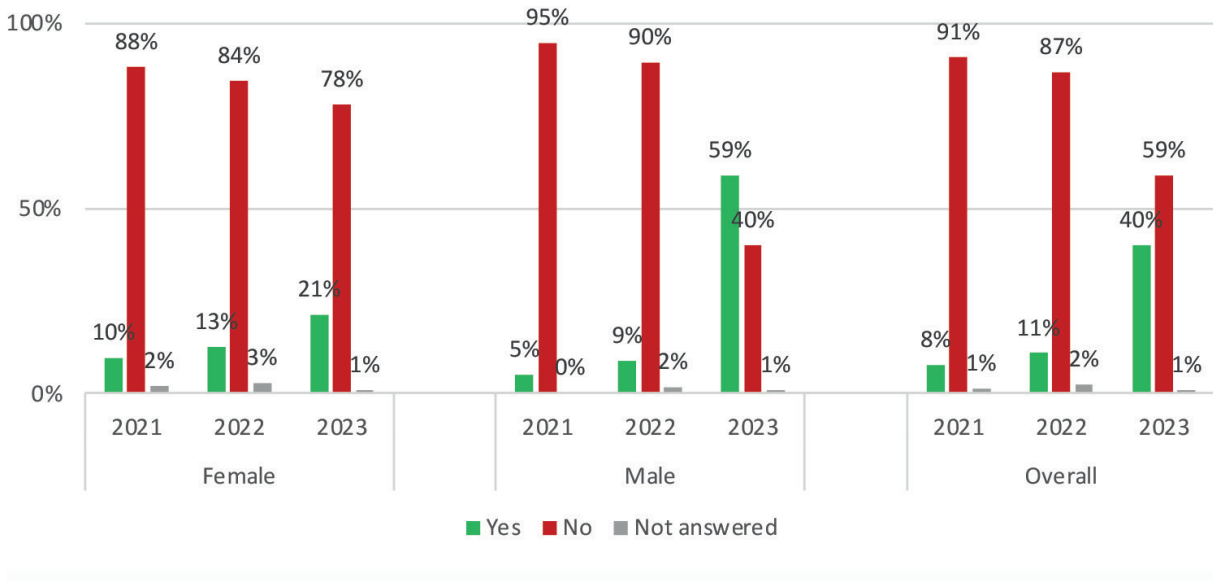
Marginalization and Political Disillusionment

Residents of Yei often trace the start of their problems to 1997 when the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) captured Yei from the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). This period brought some economic benefits to Yei as a degree of stability was established and the town became a hub for international assistance, but the SPLM/A was also accused of committing human rights abuses against civilian populations. These historical grievances have become intertwined with more proximate drivers of conflict in the current context, including political violence between government forces and non-signatories to the R-ARCSS, conflict between cattle-keepers and resident communities, and associated security responses.

The survey data shows a sense of marginalization and alienation from nation-building efforts among respondents in Yei. Only 15 percent of respondents in Yei thought that the national government cared about their community (see Figure 7). A similar trend was observed in Yambio and Torit, indicating a broader pattern of perceived marginalization across the Equatorias. These feelings of marginalization align with the ethnic diversity in the region, where numerous minority groups express frustration at dominance of more populous ethnic groups in the political and military establishment. Gender disparities were also evident, with men being considerably more likely to believe that the national government did not care about their community, paralleling the disparities observed in perceptions of safety (see Figure 8).

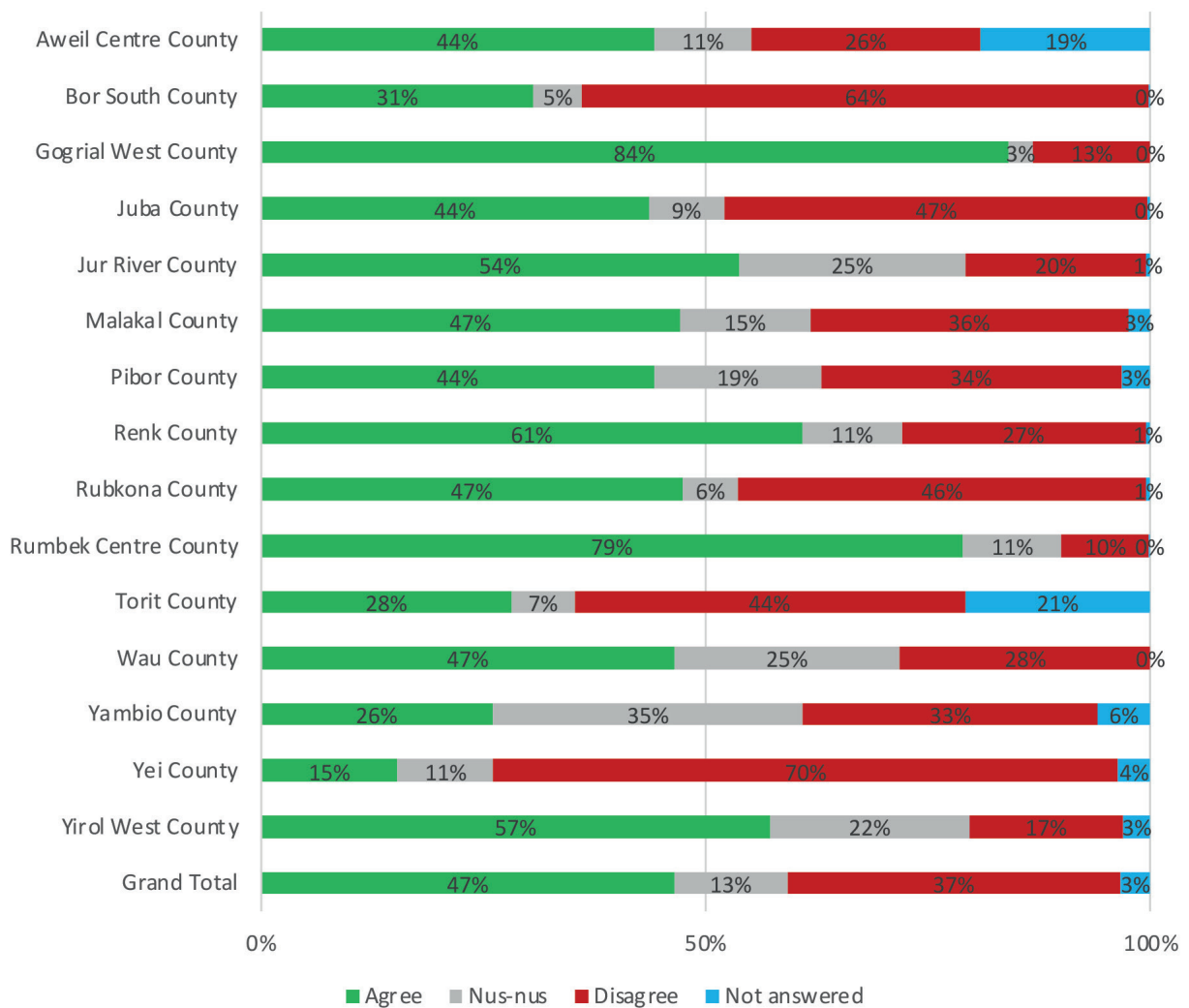**Figure 7: Agree/Disagree: 'The national government cares about my community.' By Location [2022-23, n = 7,655]**

| Location	Agree	Nus-nus	Disagree	Not answered
Aweil Centre County	44%	11%	26%	19%
Bor South County	31%	5%	64%	0%
Gogrial West County	84%	3%	13%	0%
Juba County	44%	9%	47%	0%
Jur River County	54%	25%	20%	1%
Malakal County	47%	15%	36%	3%
Pibor County	44%	19%	34%	3%
Renk County	61%	11%	27%	1%
Rubkona County	47%	6%	46%	1%
Rumbek Centre County	79%	11%	10%	0%
Torit County	28%	7%	44%	21%
Wau County	47%	25%	28%	0%
Yambio County	26%	35%	33%	6%
Yei County	15%	11%	70%	4%
Yirol West County	57%	22%	17%	3%
Grand Total	47%	13%	37%	3%

■ Agree　■ Nus-nus　■ Disagree　■ Not answered

Figure 8: Agree/Disagree: 'The national government cares about my community.' By Age and Gender [Yei only, 2022-23, n = 7,654]
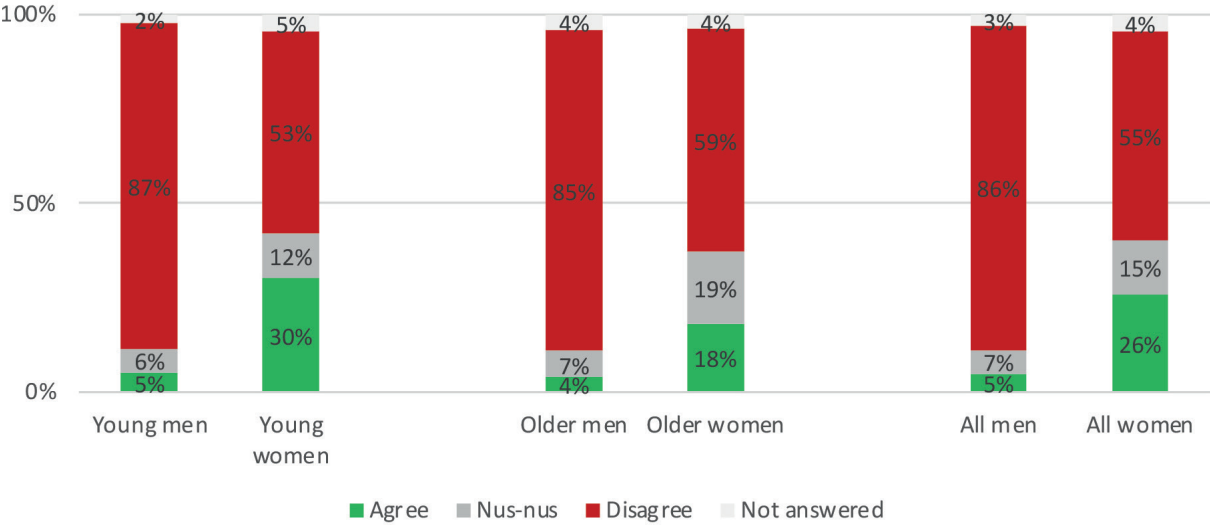
The sense of marginalization is also evident in respondent views on the secession of South Sudan from Sudan. While most respondents in Yei (70%) expressed happiness with South Sudan's secession, nearly 1 in 5 were not happy with it.[9] This sentiment was also apparent in weak support for the ruling SPLM party, which derives much of its political capital from its role in securing South Sudan's independence in 2011. Only 12 percent of respondents in Yei believed that the ruling SPLM party, or SPLM-in-Government (SPLM-IG), had the best vision for the country, compared to 15 percent who preferred NAS (see Figure 10). High levels of political alienation in Yei were apparent in the 22 percent of respondents that answered, 'none of the above [parties]', and the 23 percent that declined to answer the question. The diversity of political viewpoints suggests that Yei may be among the hotly contested constituencies in elections currently slated for the end of 2024.

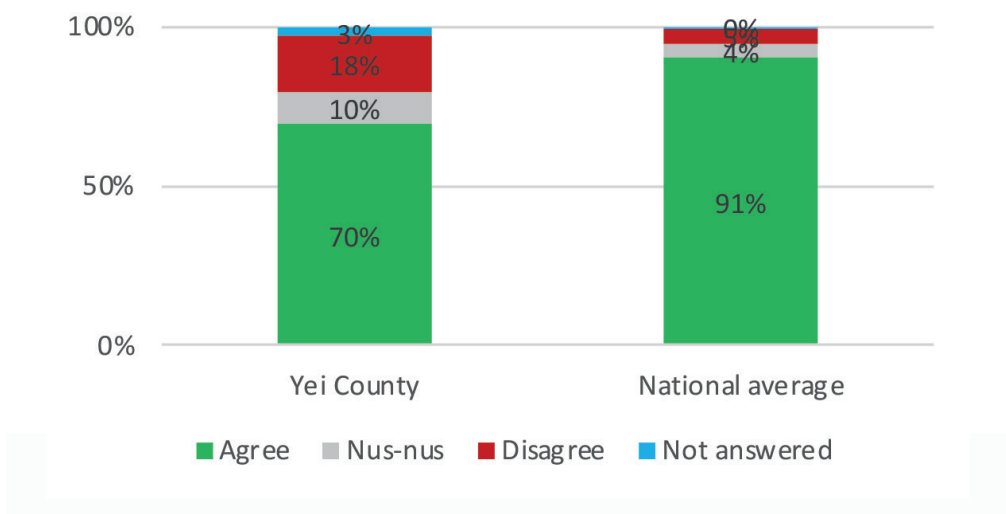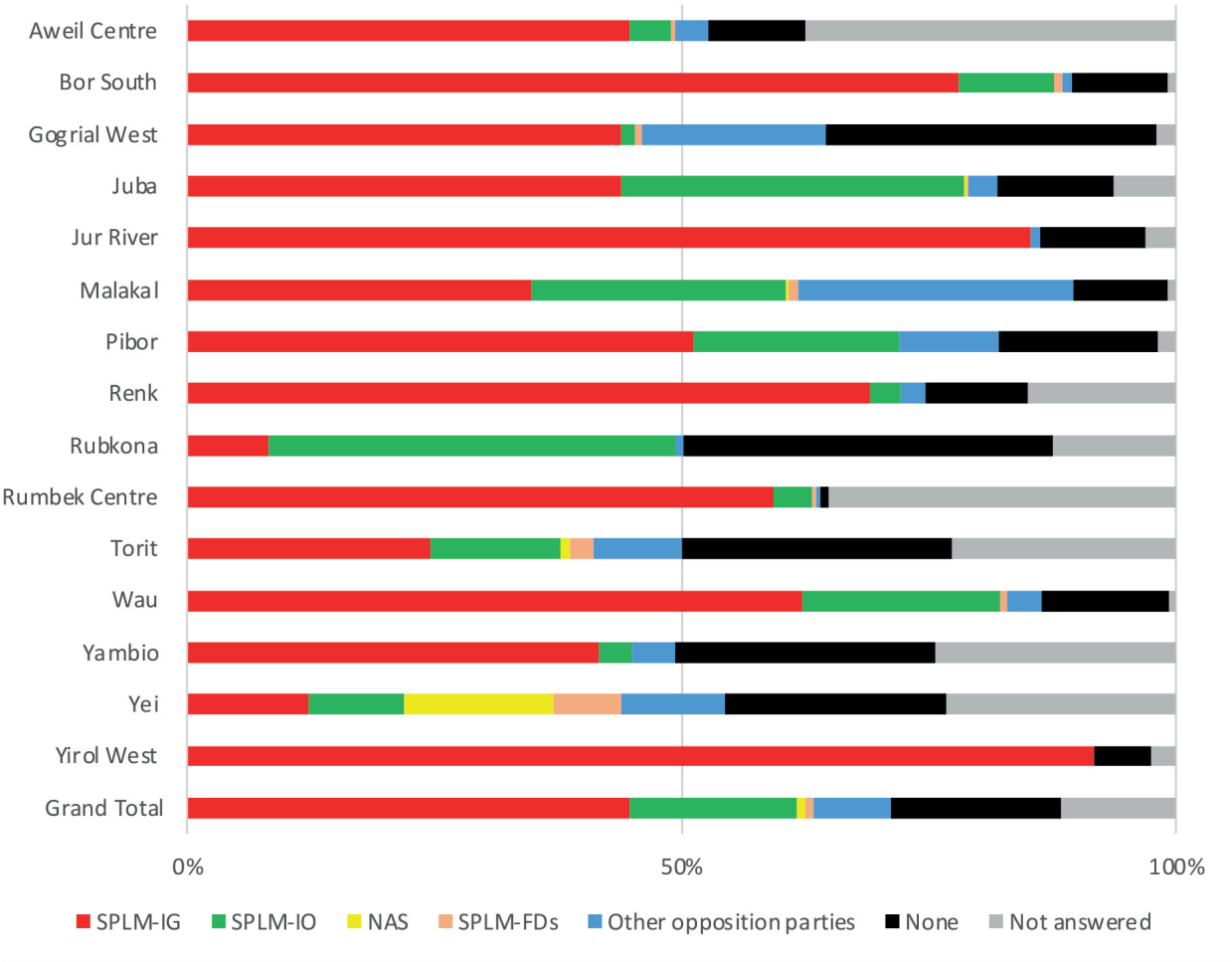**Figure 9: Agree/Disagree: 'I am happy that South Sudan seceded from Sudan.' By Location [2021-22, n=385 and 6,568]**

Figure 10: 'Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan?' [2023, n = 4,482]
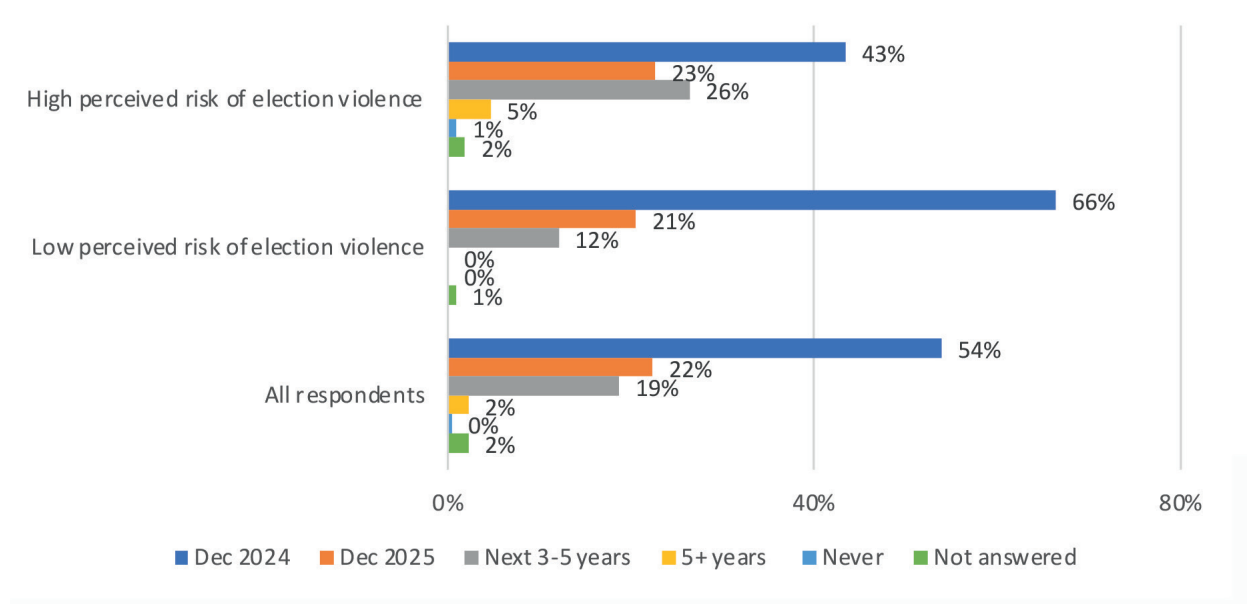
Appetite for Elections

The roadmap agreement that signatories to the R-ARCSS signed in August 2022 extended the transitional period by two years with elections to be held towards the end of 2024. Survey data shows a considerable amount of fear among the population in South Sudan about election-related violence, with 61 percent [n = 4,482] of respondents in the 2023 poll assessing the risk as 'very high' or 'somehow high'. However, over the four waves of data collection, there has been a 20-percentage point drop in the perceived risk of election-related violence in Yei, with 48 percent of respondents viewing the risk as 'very high' or 'somehow high' in 2023 compared to 68 percent in 2021. This finding reflects the general trend of improving security conditions in Yei, as seen in other indicators.

Figure 11: 'How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to the elections?' By Year [Yei only, n = 838]
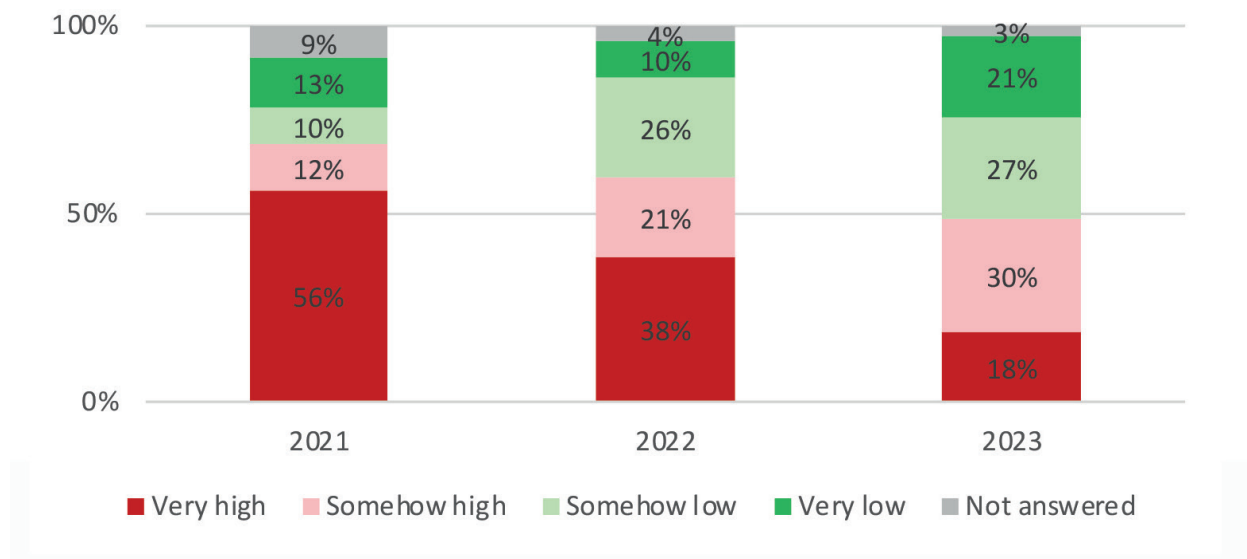
Despite the perceived risk, a majority of respondents in Yei (54%) still preferred for elections to be held in December 2024, as provided for in the roadmap agreement. Support for holding elections in December 2024 rose to 66 percent among respondents that viewed the risk of election-related violence to be low, suggesting that if security conditions continue to improve, more people may endorse the idea of holding of elections on time. Eighty-nine percent of respondents said they feel prepared to vote, further indicating a strong appetite for elections in the area.

Figure 12: 'When should elections happen? By Level of Perceived Risk of Election Violence' [2023, n = 219]

Legend: Dec 2024, Dec 2025, Next 3-5 years, 5+ years, Never, Not answered

High perceived risk of election violence: Dec 2024 43%, Dec 2025 23%, Next 3-5 years 26%, 5+ years 5%, Never 1%, Not answered 2%

Low perceived risk of election violence: Dec 2024 66%, Dec 2025 21%, Next 3-5 years 12%, 5+ years 0%, Never 0%, Not answered 1%

All respondents: Dec 2024 54%, Dec 2025 22%, Next 3-5 years 19%, 5+ years 2%, Never 0%, Not answered 2%

Concluding Remarks

Amid a peace process that has struggled with delays and violations of ceasefire agreements, the overall trend of improving security conditions – albeit unevenly felt and marginal in some locations – is a noteworthy achievement. However, policymakers must avoid complacency, as high levels of conflict persist in many parts of South Sudan. The situation remains fragile, and there are major risks associated with both internal and external factors, such as elections scheduled for the end of 2024 and the cross-border impacts of the evolving conflict situation in Sudan. Policymakers should redouble their efforts to secure a political settlement between the parties to the R-ARCSS and non-signatories while working to promote reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience initiatives in strategic locations at the subnational level, including Yei and other parts of southern Central Equatoria State. Sustaining citizen confidence in the peace process is crucial to achieving these broader objectives.

Endnotes

[1] A convenience sample of fifteen counties was selected to represent the principal regions and conflict theatres in South Sudan. The research team used an approximately self-weighting stratified random sampling approach to select households, and then individuals within households. This method centred on a randomization strategy implemented using ArcGIS and the GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01.01 dataset. For each workday, enumerators began at randomly drawn map coordinates and followed a random walk guided by smartphone apps. Enumerators recorded responses using Kobo Toolbox smartphone software. See Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University and Novel-T. 2021, GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01, Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID3), available at https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-khpa-pq09.

[2] The study drew from the Everyday Peace Indicator (EPI) methodology to develop measures of everyday safety through interviews and focus groups across five of the survey locations in January and February 2020. This produced five questions which were asked in each survey. The responses were then translated into an aggregate index of daily safety. See Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, *Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators*, International Studies Review (2017).

[3] For a more detailed description of the survey methodology, see David Deng, Sophia Dawkins, Christopher Oringa and Jan Pospisil, *Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan: Longitudinal Findings,* Detcro, ASPR and PeaceRep (2022), p. 16ff, available at https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/South-Sudan-Report-Digital.pdf.

[4] Nick Cumming-Bruce, *Over One Million South Sudanese Flee from Violence to Uganda,* New York Times (17 Aug. 2017), available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/world/africa/south-sudan-refugees-uganda.html#:~:text=GENEVA%20—%20A%20daily%20exodus%20of,called%20one%20of%20Africa's%20biggest.

[5] According to Alan Boswell: "Infighting, weak rebel military capacity, and SPLM/A-IO forces' abuses of civilians all degraded popular support for Machar, and low morale and poor supplies led to many of his fighters leaving for neighboring refugee camps instead." *Conflict and Crisis in South Sudan's Equatoria,* United States Institute of Peace (USIP) (14 Apr. 2021), available at https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/conflict-and-crisis-south-sudans-equatoria.

[6] *South Sudan: All political parties sign a peace agreement in Sant-Egidio,* available at https://www.santegidio.org/pageID/30284/langID/en/itemID/34068/South-Sudan-All-political-parties-sign-a-peace-agreement-in-Sant-Egidio.html.The non-signatories to the R-ARCSS do not recognize the legitimacy of the Roadmap Agreement that extended the transitional period to February 2025.

[7] A 2023 survey by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that among returnees in the Greater Yei area (Yei, Lainya, Kajo-Keji and Morobo), the main factor behind people's decision to return was the reduction of aid in area of displacement (57%). Other common reasons for return included returnees' perceptions that the security situation and livelihood opportunities have improved in the areas of return (45% each). See International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), *Return and Reintegration Survey in South Sudan's Former Breadbasket* (9 Mar. 2023), available at https://dtm.iom.int/reports/south-sudan-return-and-reintegration-survey-south-sudans-former-breadbasket.

[8] *South Sudan – Mobility Tracking Round 13, Initial Data Release,* IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) (Mar. 2023), available at https://dtm.iom.int/reports/south-sudan-mobility-tracking-round-13-initial-data-release.

[9] A similar trend was apparent in Pibor, another location that has suffered with large-scale violence in recent years.

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