

Transitional Government of National Unity in South Sudan

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Abstract

This paper examines the Transitional Government of National Unity constituted in South Sudan in 2020 on the terms of the 2018 peace agreement entered into by the warring parties. Despite the strategic importance of the transitional government to the country's nation building, development and democratization, transitional government in South Sudan has been understudied and requires a more rigorous and systematic analysis. This paper has addressed this gap. Utilizing secondary data and analysing from the theoretical lens of humanitarian development approach and related and relevant literature review, the paper offers three main critiques of the transitional government; its failure in carrying out its interim mandate creditably which is an obstacle to development and democratization, the continuous extension of the transitional government beyond its formally stated term limits, and the perception that the grand coalition of political elite in the transitional government is using the transitional government to pursue narrow political and economic interests at the detriment of the people. This paper charges the transitional government on the speedy implementation of its mandate and the holding of elections and transfer of power to a democratic government with the continued support of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, the citizenry and civil society organizations.

Keywords: South Sudan, Transitional Government, Peace Agreement, Development, Democratic Governance

Introduction

The political economy of South Sudan is replete with protracted wars, governance crisis and large-scale human and climate-induced crisis. Political instability and the crisis of governance necessitated the formation of a transitional government on the terms of peace agreements mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 2015 and 2018 respectively. Despite the significance of the transitional government to the governance, politics, development and democratization of South Sudan, it is yet to receive a rigorous and systematic analytical attention. This paper has, therefore, done justice to this issue by examining the nature of the transitional government in South Sudan as well as its limitations, including what is required to restore democratic governance without unnecessary and perpetuated extension of the transitional government.

It is therefore, imperative to reckon with the political history of South Sudan in order to place the circumstances warranting the emergence of the transitional government in proper perspective. To start with, in 2011, following a United Nations supervised referendum based on the terms of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement for the Resolution of the conflict in Sudan; South Sudanese trooped out and voted overwhelmingly for their independence, and thus became formally separated from the Republic of Sudan. Paradoxically, the Sudan People's

Liberation Movement (SPLM) which had been the vanguard of the political revolution became fractionalized on account of struggle for power and control over the economy by its leadership as soon as independence was granted. Emerging from the SPLM were the President Salva Kiir's Sudan's Peoples Liberation Movement and Army in Government (SPLM-IG) and Vice President Riek Machar led Sudan's Peoples Liberation Movement and Army in Opposition (SPLM-IO). The struggles for power and control over the resource based-economy powered principally by oil wealth, intertwined with communal identities, agrarian poverty and animosities, snowballed into a full-scale war in 2013.

The State became entangled in an unending fragility even with peacekeeping intervention by the United Nations and regional organizations, especially the African Union and the Intergovernmental Organization for Development (IGAD). Knopf (2016) argues that nearly three years after the civil war began, armed conflict and mass violence against civilians continued unabated, putting South Sudan's economy in shambles. An estimated 7,165 civilians were killed in just five counties of one state in South Sudan over a twelve-month period from 2014–2015 (Knopf, 2016). Furthermore, the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), (2022, p.17) chronicles that “The people of South Sudan continued to be impacted by violence throughout 2021.

It documented that more than 982 violent incidents affecting at least 3,444 (three thousand and forty-four) civilians. The victims were subjected to one of the four major types of individual harm: killing, injury, abduction and conflict related sexual violence. Further breakdown of the figure shows that men constituted 75 percent (2,567 men) of the victims, women 14 percent (481 women) and children 11 percent (366 children) (Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2022). The country became entrapped in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis regarded by the United Nations as level three humanitarian emergencies. Between 2014 and 2015, South Sudan was designated by the United Nations as a level 3 (L3) humanitarian emergency; a designation describing the most severe and complex humanitarian emergencies. An estimated 8.9 million people, or more than two-thirds of the country's population, were projected to require humanitarian assistance in 2022, up from 8.3 million in 2021 (Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2022).

To resolve these conflicts, a peace deal mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on development (IGAD), was signed in 2015. But a transitional government established in 2016 on the basis of that agreement collapsed shortly afterwards. In 2018, the peace deal was revitalized and a transitional government was constituted in 2020 with a mandate to carry out “broad reforms” and transfer power to a democratic government thirty months from the date of signing the agreement. Despite the importance of the transitional government, research on the political process and governance of South Sudan has tended to neglect this important area. This paper examines the nature and implications of the transitional government on the politics, development and democratization South Sudan.

Conceptual Clarifications: Transitional Government of National Unity

The proliferation and intensification of internal conflicts, political instability, and the collapse of duly constituted governments often necessitates the establishment of transitional governments' as a means of ending armed conflicts, building peace and restoring constitutional rule in fragile societies. Conceptually, De Groof (2019) is of the view that a transitional government exists in a period during which a state's constitution and institutions are held in abeyance during a transition, especially in the context of an armed conflict, or a threat to international peace and security. He argues that transitional governments are set up to operate

within a short period of time in the circumstances and with a limited mandate. In other words, a transitional government, generally, refers to a situation whereby the constitution and institutions of a state are temporary overhauled in response to the occurrence of conflict or violent social crisis.

In view of the foregoing, this article defines a transitional government of national unity as a temporary inclusive political arrangement set up to run the affairs of a State in the context of armed conflict and political instability with the prospect of restoring political order. Under this arrangement, de jure governmental structure of the state is temporary suspended within a specified period of time. De Groof (2019) explains that a transitional government is characterized by (a) the transformation of a state's regime by non-constitutional means on the basis of legal instruments or accords with a temporary constitutional status. De Groof (2019) further enumerates the characteristics of a transitional government as follows:

- a. **Legal internationalization of the transitional period:** This is the view that transitional governments are established by or backed by international law. This implies that the exercise of public authority during the transitional period must respect international legal norms such as human rights law and humanitarian law.
- b. **Time limit:** According to this principle, a transitional government operates within a limited time and ideally cannot be prolonged artificially or indefinitely. Transitional governments must operate without frequent or long interruptions or delays, and subsequently transfer power. In several cases, transition leaders or even all transition office-holders are ineligible to hold office after the transition i.e. the 'ineligibility-after-transition practice'. Notables examples of time-bound transitional governments are the transitions in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Guinea, Guinea, Bissau, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Nepal, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen.
- c. **Functionally limited to transitional governance:** According to this principle, a transitional government should have a subject matter that is limited only within the transitional period. This means that the powers of the transitional government should be circumscribed to the period of the transition and restricted to its mandate. It should not be free to entrench the future constitutional status or dominate the present. Rather, a transitional government must execute the transition and administer the country on a provisional basis, including by restoring security, and prepare for the future without foreshadowing their own transition to power.
- d. **Inclusivity or National Unity:** Transitional governments are characterized by what is called "the practice and discourse of inclusivity" (De Groof, 2019). This means that a system of institutional transition cannot be unilaterally defined by the new *de facto* authorities in power. Rather, it calls for a genuine broad dialogue between the warring parties, usually embracing power sharing arrangements that foster a sense of inclusion in the running of government.
- e. **Transitional Justice:** Transitional governments generally provide for the domestic ownership of transitional justice. This implies that transitional governments are required, or impose on themselves, the task of addressing the past injustices and atrocities committed in their respective countries for the purpose of healing and reconciliation necessary for peace and development. To achieve this, transitional justice systems are typically 'owned' by the population of the state in transition. In this study, focus is on the transitional government of

national unity created by the comprehensive peace agreements of 2015 and the revitalized comprehensive peace agreement of 2018, respectively.

Theoretical Framework: Humanitarian-Development Theory

The analysis of Transitional Government of National Unity in South Sudan is premised on the theoretical underpinnings of humanitarian-development theory (Cunningham (2017; Lie 2020; International Peace Institute, 2018). The main thrust of the theory is that the management of humanitarian crisis should be cognizant of the imperative of peace, recovery and development and not dependence or reliance on the provision of aid that does not address the underlying causes of conflict. Indeed, the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 brought increased focus to the humanitarian-development nexus strategy on a global scale. The main argument of the theory, as adumbrated by the International Peace Institute (IPI) (2018, p. 1) is that there is more emphasis on addressing the root causes of conflicts and paving the way for development rather than reliance on the provision of relief support to populations affected by conflicts.

Referred to as "sustaining peace" by the International Peace Institute (2018), it champions the need for creating a shared vision of a community while making sure that the needs of all demographic segments are taken into consideration. The four main assumptions of sustaining peace are: (i) Peace is a state of mind that grows from below. It gives priority to the local people and communities as the starting point for discussion about peace and development. It is suspicious of top-down approaches to conflict resolution and development which rarely establish the basis for long-lasting (ii) external actors involved in peace and development ought to examine and reinforce the peacekeeping mechanisms that people still rely on during times of unrest (iii) External interveners must make sure that, despite their best intentions, their assistance does not inadvertently worsen the exact factors that gave rise to conflict or impair the ability for healing and reconciliation. (iv) if international humanitarian assistance concurrently attends to the security, human rights, development, and humanitarian needs of resentful populations, it stands a greater chance of establishing the conditions necessary for maintaining peace. According to the International Peace Institute (2018), the reasoning behind this is that development may promote peace, and humanitarian activities can support development, and populations affected by conflict do not experience these needs sequentially.

The humanitarian-development approach offers a new way of humanitarian action that transcends the delivery of humanitarian assistance and recognises the fact that, while humanitarian assistance is crucial for meeting the needs of those impacted by conflicts, it is insufficient to address the root causes of conflicts and needs of the world's most vulnerable people as well as chart the roadmap for peace, recovery and development. The approach, as Strand (2020) argues, aims to address the root causes—activities that not only usually identify the development segment but also occur prior to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the provision of long-term development assistance—and connects humanitarian management with conflict prevention. Lie (2020) contends that the understanding of the war-to-peace transition as a continuum serves as its justification. Thus, it is important to remember that conflict and peace are not mutually exclusive and that different parties need to be encouraged to work together to bring about peace.

Lie (2020) maintains that, in spite of their differences, actors in the humanitarian sector have a higher moral attitude to policy and practical work than do more pragmatic and political development actors. He contends that when humanitarian actors uphold the humanitarian ideals of humanism, impartiality, independence, and neutrality, the humanitarian-development nexus

can be attained. According to the author, these principles play a crucial role in defining the identity and legitimacy of humanitarian actors, guiding their actions, and creating the theoretical and actual humanitarian space in which they function. However, the humanitarian principles are propositions and beliefs that direct activity, establish norms, and serve as benchmarks against which conduct aspires and is subsequently judged, rather than blueprints or a straitjacket. This means that the principles are open to contextual interpretation and application by many actors in various contexts, which has an impact on the nexus between development and humanitarianism.

The humanitarian-development approach is applicable to this paper because the subject matter of assessing the effectiveness of, transitional government South Sudan which was set up for the purpose of bringing an end to the country's armed conflicts, providing public goods, initiating and executing reforms to entrench good governance, facilitating economic development and enabling the restoration of democratic governance and ensuring the recovery of development are the key issues embedded in the humanitarian-development approach to humanitarian management. The transitional government in South Sudan was established with the agency to provide interim governance to in South Sudan and eventually transfer power to a democratically elected government capable of addressing the country's myriad of development challenges.

Transitional Government of National Unity in South Sudan

Shortly after the attainment of independence, bitter struggles for power ensued between two main factions of the ruling elite led by President Salva Kiir and the First Vice President Reik Machar, respectively. In 2013, the power struggle snowballed into a full-blown political crisis in the capital Juba and metamorphosed into a Civil War, spreading and intermingling with communal and agrarian insecurity. An unprecedented migration and humanitarian crisis ensued. To bring an end to the war, the warring parties, mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), signed the first peace agreement in August 2015. After missing several implementation deadlines, the transitional government of national unity provided in the agreement was established in 2016 with Salva Kiir as President and Riek Machar as First Vice President.

The civil war momentarily ended. However, Salva Kiir in total disregard to the terms of the agreement went ahead and created by decree, twenty-eight (28) new states out of the original ten (10) states and thereby increased the total number of States to 32 in 2017. Reik Machar opposed this restructuring and the disagreements that followed eventually culminated in the collapse of the transitional arrangement. South Sudan then relapsed into protracted conflict, necessitating the IGAD again to mediate the process that culminated in the revitalization of the peace agreement of 2015 thereby giving rise to the Revitalized Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2018. With the signing of the 2018 peace accord, the number of states was reversed to the original 10 States (Blenchard, 2016; Knopf, 2016; Afriye, Jisong, & Appiah, 2020).

As stipulated in Chapter 1 of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which was signed in Addis Ababa on September 12, 2018 by the government and opposition political groups, South Sudan established the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) on February 22, 2020. The revitalized transitional government was constituted on the basis of power sharing among the warring groups which as stipulated in the agreement are the incumbent transitional government of national unity, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), the Former Detainees (FDs), and the other

political parties outside of the incumbent transitional government including the Alliance, Umbrella and political parties that participated, such as the High Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF). The structure of government consisted of the executive, the judiciary and the legislature with ceasefire and transitional security arrangements as well as other critical commissions and corporations as stipulated in the peace deal (R-ARCSS, 2018).

The executive is constituted with Salva Kiir as President of the Republic of South Sudan with Dr Riek Machar Teny as the First Vice President. There are four Vice Presidents nominated to oversee the following clusters; governance, economy, services delivery, infrastructure, and gender and youth. There is a council of Ministers which comprises of thirty-five Ministries which are distributed across the five clusters with the governance cluster having twelve ministries (12), economic cluster eleven (11), Services delivery cluster five (5), Infrastructure three (3) and Gender Youth cluster four (4). The Ministerial positions are allocated across the power sharing blocks as follows: incumbent transitional government twenty (20), SPLM/A-IO nine (9), South Sudan Opposition Alliance three (3), FDs two (2) and other political parties one (1). In addition, there are ten Deputy Minsters (R-ARCSS, 2018).

The revitalized transitional government also has a judiciary with the mandate to carryout judicial reforms to bring the judicial system in tandem with the peace agreement. This task is vested in the Judicial Reforms Committee whose members are drawn from the major power sharing blocks stipulated in the agreement. There is also the National Constitutional Amendment Committee (NACAC) which is vested with the legal capacity to draft and complete a constitutional Amendment Bill and review and amend relevant security legislations as well as the political parties Act 2012, and the National Elections Act 2012 to bring them in line with the terms of the agreement.

The amendment of the National Elections Act 2012 was to be completed no later than seven (7) months after the commencement of the transitional period. The reconstituted Transitional National Legislative Assembly (TNLA) is responsible for drafting a permanent constitution for South Sudan as a necessary step towards the transfer of power to a democratic government. “The President in conjunction with the parties to this agreement and with the approval of the TNLA shall constitute a competent and impartial National Elections Commission (NEC) to conduct election” (R-ARCSS, 2018). Sixty days to the end of the transitional period, the national elections Commission was to organize elections as stipulated in the Permanent constitution adopted pursuant to the terms of the peace deal, broadly reflecting the will of the people of South Sudan (R-ARCSS, 2018). The mandate of the revitalized transitional government as provided in Chapter 1 of the 2018 agreement is as follows:

- a. Implement this Agreement and restore permanent and sustainable peace, security and stability in the country;
- b. Expedite the relief, protection, voluntary and dignified repatriation, rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration of IDPs and returnees, working closely with the United Nations and other international agencies;
- c. Facilitate and oversee a people-driven process of national reconciliation and healing through an independent mechanism in accordance with this Agreement including budgetary provisions for compensation and reparations;
- d. Oversee and ensure that the Permanent Constitution making process is successfully carried out and completed before the end of the Transitional Period;
- e. Work closely with the IGAD-PLUS Member States and Organizations and other partners and friends of South Sudan, to consolidate peace and stability in the country;

- f. Carry out radical reforms and transformation of public financial management systems to ensure transparency and accountability;
- g. Ensure prudent, transparent and accountable management of national wealth and resources to build the nation and promote the welfare of the people;
- h. Carry out the functions of government;
- i. Restructure, rehabilitate, and ensure radical reform of the civil service;
- j. Design and implement security sector reforms and security sector transformation, to include the restructuring and reconstitution of institutions;
- k. Rebuild and recover destroyed physical infrastructure and give special attention to prioritizing the rebuilding of livelihoods of those affected by the conflict;
- l. Reconstitute a competent and independent National Elections Commission (NEC) to conduct free, fair and credible elections before the end of the Transitional Period and ensure that the outcome reflects the will of the electorate;
- m. Conduct a National Population and Housing Census before the end of the Transitional Period;
- n. Devolve more powers and resources to the State and Local Government levels. (R-ARCSS, 2018).

The Revitalized Transitional Government was, therefore, expected to execute its multifaceted governance mandate as highlighted above. Since the takeoff of the transitional government however, the socioeconomic and political reality of South Sudan is completely at cross-purposes with the mandate of the transitional government. The revitalized transitional government of national unity turned out to be a dismal failure. It woefully failed in the discharge its mandate. It has been unable to discharge its mandate in addressing the country's development challenges and putting it on the path of democratic governance. It is the position of this discourse that the revitalized transitional government has failed in lifting the country out of conflict and setting it on the pathway of recovery, democratization and accelerated development as envisaged by the comprehensive peace agreement of 2018.

This has been the case despite the presence of the United Nations Mission's mandate requiring it to support the peace process in South Sudan. The establishment of the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management and the enactment of the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons Act 2019 have not addressed the humanitarian problem in the country. Political instability, agrarian conflicts, hunger, poverty, unemployment, the collapse of agriculture, dependence on resource rents, and corruption have continued to be the defining attributes of the South Sudan's socioeconomic and political existence.

As Mahmoud (2025) argues "The current political project in South Sudan has morally and politically collapsed. It no longer represents the aspirations of the people but instead serves the interests of entrenched ruling elite". The United Nations Security Council (2024) argues that political elites in South Sudan are busy building their business empires while the people are subjected to unprecedented human suffering. Even the South Sudanese opposition which initially embodied the hopes and aspirations of the people has become the victim of insatiable quest for power, resource control and primitive accumulation. This view is collaborated by Mahmoud (2025) who maintains that the opposition leaders in the transitional government are more interested in negotiating for positions and privileges within the government rather than committing to a roadmap of development and democracy.

Worse still, the transitional government failed to organize national elections to transfer power to democratically elected government at the expiration of the transitional period. Instead, on August 4, 2022, the parties to the September 2018 peace deal agreed and extended the transitional period for another 24 months, effective from February 2023 (Sudan Tribune, 2022; The Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), 2022; United Nations, 2023). Two-third majority of members of RJMEC, in accordance to Article 8.4 of the R-ARCSS voted to extend the lifespan of the transitional government from 23 February until 22nd February 2025 (Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) (2022). After the expiration of the extended period, the transitional period was further extended, making the United Nations to conclude that “the transition has been extended four times, with key political, security and governance benchmarks remaining unfulfilled” (United Nations, 2025). The last extension of the transitional government will last until February, 2027 when it is expected that national elections will be held and democratic governance put in place. It is therefore clear that perpetual transition has become an obstacle to democracy (United Nations, 2024; United Nations 2025; Mahmoud, 2025) and development in South Sudan (Mahmoud, 2025).

The political leadership of South Sudan has resorted to the baseless defence of the repeated extensions of the interim government. For instance, the Human Rights Watch (2022) claimed that President Salva Kiir defended the extension of the transitional period on the grounds that it would afford the transitional government more time to carryout “unfinished reforms” such as the preparation for elections, the enactment of a new constitution, and the unification of the divided armed forces before the holding of elections. The extension of the transitional period by an extra period raised questions about the sincerity of the South Sudanese authorities in the democratization of the political process, given their repeated inability to meet deadlines in the implementation of the peace agreement and the creation of the RTGoNU. Thus, as the Security Council observed, "The political and peace building process headquartered in Juba has been largely focused on itself rather than on governing to alleviate the crises," (United States Security Council, 2022, p. 2).

Conclusion

Two peace agreements provided for the formation of transitional governments of national unity – the 2015 and 2018 peace agreements. The first attempt to form a transitional government in 2016 failed due to disagreements among the warring parties. The second attempt at the formation of the transitional government in the Republic of South Sudan was successfully in September, 2020 after missing many deadlines. However, the transitional government was to last for only 36 months after which it would handover to a democratically elected government by February 2023. The deadline was not met and the parties to the 2018 agreement extended the lifespan of the peace deal and the transitional government four times from February 2023 to February 2027.

This extension is an obstacle to democracy and development in South Sudan as the political elite in the transitional government is more interested its selfish political and economic interests while the citizenry are perishing in hunger, poverty, unemployment, insecurity and environmental disasters and unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The United nations Mission in South Sudan has played only a marginal role in the implementation of the peace deal. However, the IGAD and the AU a have been particularly important roles in the resolution of the continental problem, underscoring the need for Africans to remain committed to resolving their heir own

problems through and by themselves. The transitional government in South Sudan must speedily carry out all the reforms required to hold elections to avoid missing out on the deadline of February 2027. The continued support of IGAD and the African Union will be critical to the actualization of this mission. The support of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan to policy reforms will be critical in transitioning from interim governance to democratic governance. Above all, the parties in government, South Sudanese and civil society organizations must all give their support to the nation building project in South Sudan to succeed.

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