

Policy Brief

Preparing for Inclusive and Peaceful Elections in South Sudan

by Jutta Martens and Gina Dias

“Peaceful elections mean peaceful South Sudan – never take us back to war!”

South Sudan is preparing to hold its first general elections in December 2024. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) of 2018 and The National Election Act of 2012 included legislative guidelines for organizing elections. A roadmap was established leading to the elections scheduled for December 2024, but communication, concrete actions and preparations to actualize the elections are still largely pending. Fear that violence will erupt if the elections are organized according to the schedule is commonly shared, though, conflicts may occur also in case the elections are postponed, especially if no clear timeline or plan with conditions are communicated to the people.

Religious leaders have historically had significant role in building and sustaining peace in South Sudan. They were crucial contributors to the R-ARCSS, signed in 2018. They had significant role in this so-called Rome process, initiated by Community of Sant’ Egidio, a lay Catholic association, in trying to ensure hold-out groups to join the R-ARCSS. After South Sudan’s request for Kenya to take over the Rome process, Kenya’s President Ruto met with representatives of Sant’ Egidio in Rome in January 2024 and expressed his commitment in the process. The religious leaders continue lobbying and advocating for broader inclusion in R-ARCSS, and the process, now led by Kenya.



The Network
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Currently, the biggest concern of the religious leaders is how to sustain peace in South Sudan. How to prevent and manage the potential of violent conflicts flaring up as the elections draw closer? The key messages emerging from the religious leaders is that people want to see peaceful and inclusive elections, and whatever the government and state leaders decide, they should never take South Sudan back to war.

The churches and religious leaders have been instrumental in enforcing social cohesion, spreading peaceful messages, trauma healing, resolving conflicts between conflicting parties, and facilitating dialogue across the country’s varied communities over the years. These actors are well respected, and they have legitimacy and trust among the people. The Church and religious leaders have existing structures, reach, and resources, hence huge potential that could be used to support the roll out of peaceful elections in South Sudan. The Church and the Religious Leaders are ready to support the government in the roll out of free, fair and peaceful elections, and work in sustaining peace in South Sudan.

30 religious leaders gathered to join forces in support of peaceful elections.

South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) with the support of Finn Church Aid (FCA) and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (The Network) organized a two-day consultative workshop in March 2024 in Juba. 30 religious leaders came together to discuss about the current situation in South Sudan, the challenges, successes, lessons learnt regarding the peace processes as well as looking for concrete action points on the contributions religious and traditional leaders, and the Church could play in contributing towards peaceful, free and fair elections.

The workshop participants represented religious leaders from the Christian denominations, women of faith, youth of faith, Interreligious Council of South Sudan, Interreligious women of faith network, Special Advisor to the President’s Office, and Political Parties Council. The representative from the Ministry of Peacebuilding provided the opening and closing remarks to the workshop.



Participants share a photo together at the consultative workshop. 2024. Photo: Antti Yrjönen (FCA).



Participants at the consultative workshop in Juba, South Sudan convened by the South Sudan Council of Churches, Finn Church Aid, and the Peacemakers Network. 2024.

Key Messages from the Religious Leaders to the Government of South Sudan

Religious leaders share serious concerns related to the first elections in South Sudan, scheduled for December 2024. If the elections take place as planned, there is significant risk of violent conflict escalation that might have implications regionally as well. The situation in Sudan intensifies the fragility of the region, including South Sudan, even further.

The religious leaders call for technical support and resources for the government and the institutions, to be able to run the elections in a free, fair, credible and transparent way. **The religious and traditional leaders' capacities, influence and reach in their communities can and should be utilized in election preparedness.**

Religious leaders have an impact on the people and the communities as they are trusted and have the needed legitimacy. These leaders have the morale responsibility, and the Church has been able to sustain its nonpartisan stance, therefore they are well positioned to work on reconciliation, to put forward peaceful messages and call for social cohesion before, during and after elections. Church is also a place where trauma healing is taking place and peer support can be provided. This unique position should be acknowledged and utilised.

Religious leaders were crucial contributors to the R-ACRSS, signed in 2018. They had significant role in this so-called Rome process, in trying to ensure hold-out groups to join the agreement. **Religious leaders could support in the process of broader inclusion of the R-ARCSS.**

Awareness raising and civic education on the Electoral Act is needed, as people must understand their rights regarding the elections to get them voting. If provided the mandate and appropriate resources, religious leaders could support in the monitoring of the free and fair elections. They are also optimally positioned to conduct civic education, awareness raising, and sharing information about the electoral processes and the civic rights related to voting.

Religious leaders have a significant role in fighting against misinformation, as the Church is often considered a source of truthful messages. The Church has a wide reach to the communities and religious leaders can have influence on people, therefore, they have huge potential in disseminating the messages of peace and hope. Factual information and peaceful messages related to the elections could be shared by using the new tools, such as creating positive social media campaigns, utilizing joint slogans, and disseminating prayers and ecumenical pilgrimages to foster the peaceful, positive, and hopeful coexistence.

Women and youth should be meaningfully engaged and included in elections processes and peace work. To be able to draft a sustainable constitution, minorities, women, and youth need to have influence in the designing process. Youth represent more than 70 percent of the population of South Sudan, and women have had significant role in peacebuilding, especially at the community levels. Religious leaders can add value in transferring the messages from the people to the constitution drafting.

Traditional leaders have significant influence in their respective communities. For most South Sudanese, the concepts of central national government and democratic system are distant, with no significant influence on daily life. Therefore, traditional leaders are crucial in civic education and for sustaining local peace.

The lack of funding and resources causes challenges in the peace work that religious leaders can currently do. Additional financial resources and capacity building would enable the religious leaders to work better to their full potential. Especially women flagged that the limited funding and resources set constraints to the activities that they are able to conduct.

Religious leaders and the Church have played a pivotal role in conflict resolution, mediation and in achieving and sustaining peace in South Sudan. If the elections will take place as planned, significant efforts are needed to sustain the relative peace in South Sudan. The religious leaders have the capacity, legitimacy, reach and willingness to support in the peaceful electoral process.

South Sudan should never be taken back to war. The Church and the religious leaders are calling for free, fair, inclusive and transparent elections that need to be rolled out peacefully.

About Finn Church Aid (FCA)

Finn Church Aid (FCA) is Finland's largest development and humanitarian aid organization, supporting humanitarian and development programs in Sudan since 1972 and establishing a presence in South Sudan in 2010. FCA's work in South Sudan focuses on peacebuilding, humanitarian aid, and development through partnerships with local communities, traditional and religious leaders, youth, and women. They support the South Sudan Council of Churches and other faith-based actors in facilitating political and civilian-military dialogues and reconciliation activities. Currently, FCA is involved in multiple peacebuilding projects funded by the UN, MFA Finland, and the EU, including training peace committee members, facilitating consultations on community tensions, and building capacity within national and state ministries of peacebuilding, emphasizing inclusive and non-violent dialogue between communities and states.

About the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (Peacemakers Network)

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (Peacemakers Network) is an international organization that connects grassroots peacemakers with regional and global players to promote sustainable peace. Founded in 2013, the Peacemakers Network includes 108 members worldwide, such as religious and traditional peacemakers, NGOs, think tanks, policy centers, and academic institutes. Hosted by Finn Church Aid in Helsinki, Finland, the Peacemakers Network has supported in peacebuilding in South Sudan since 2017. Key initiatives include organizing planning workshops and retreats, supporting back-channel diplomacy, and fostering communication between South Sudanese government leaders and opposition groups, culminating in a peace agreement in May 2018.

For more information, please contact:

- Seme Nelson, Country Director of FCA South Sudan at seme.nelson@kua.fi;
- Gina Dias, Regional Programme Manager for Africa of the Peacemakers Network at gina.dias@kua.fi.