

# 'Ringing the Bell' A Call for Peaceful Elections in South Sudan

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The Network  
for Religious  
& Traditional  
Peacemakers



## Background and Context

South Sudan is preparing for its first general elections since gaining its independence in 2011. The elections are scheduled for December 2024. This will be the first time the people of South Sudan get to elect their representatives.

In 2011 the hopes and expectations for the new nation were high. Two years later, in 2013, disagreements however broke out within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) led by President Salva Kiir (on one hand) and his Deputy Dr. Riek Machar (on the other), resulting in armed confrontation. The armed confrontations were marred with ethnic undertones. In 2015 a Peace Agreement was signed ending the two-year civil war. Due to the urgency, the Agreement was prepared hastily, and many details remained unresolved. Many also argue that the Peace Agreement, roadmap, and the set timeline were over ambitious and hence the agreement did not hold. In July 2016, violence broke out in Juba.

In 2018, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ACRCS) was signed which has largely held to date. Nevertheless, several groups did not sign the agreement in 2018, and since then, there has been concentrated efforts to ensure these hold-out groups join the R-ACRCS. The role of the Church and religious leaders in this so-called Rome process, initiated by Community of Sant' Egidio, a lay Catholic association, was significant. Religious leaders and the Church played an active role in trying to ensure hold-out groups to join the R-ACRCS. 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 have continued to lobby and advocate for broader inclusion in R-ARCSS, and the process, now led by Kenya.

South Sudan has one of the most challenging electoral environments in Africa. Democratic political institutions remain weak or absent, preserving limited power sharing and accountability. The R-ARCSS and The National Election Act<sup>1</sup> were developed to provide legislative guidelines for organizing elections. A road map was established leading to the elections scheduled for December 2024, but the communication and the concrete actions and preparations from the government side to actualize the elections have not been clear. Serious concerns are shared that the conditions necessary for holding credible elections are not yet in place. This has caused a lot of uncertainty and confusion on the timeline and the possibilities to ensure free, fair, credible and peaceful elections.

The greatest barrier to viable elections in South Sudan is the lack of political will—not only to hold elections but also to establish independent oversight bodies, address corruption, and reforming and professionalizing the Security Sector. There is long-lasting political rivalry between the leaders, often with ethnic groups being quickly mobilized for political and military support by the different camps. The political contestants have also opposed views on the elections and their timing. The President in power, who has ruled the country since 2005, has announced the elections and his candidacy in the 2024 elections whereas the opposition and the First Vice President are against

<sup>1</sup> Chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://mojca.gov.ss/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/National-Elections-Act-39-of-2012.pdf

holding the elections this year as the process and the required steps agreed in the Peace Agreement to ensure free and fair elections are still pending.

Armed militias formed on ethnic lines cause violence and insecurity, especially in the countryside. The trauma and fear of the conflict escalation and violence are profoundly embedded within the population.

Despite these serious challenges, South Sudan's civil society has been extremely resilient, calling for reforms, greater transparency, and government accountability. The priority of the reformers has been the passage of the National Elections Act in 2023. The Act obligates more extensive geographical representation as well as a 35-percent female representation, aiming to enhance the inclusion and to reduce the domination of power by a single party. In addition, the Political Parties Act provides mechanisms for regulating the political parties by ensuring internal democratic governance and accountability.

## The Role of Religious and Traditional Leaders

The churches and religious leaders have been instrumental in enforcing social cohesion, spreading peaceful messages, and facilitating dialogue across the country's varied communities over the years. The church has been the institution that has remained on the ground with people, providing many of the services such as health care, education, emergency relief, food, shelter and even shelter. These actors could support in the election preparedness before, during and after the election date.



*New-Fangak-School-Journey, South Sudan. 2024. Photo: Antti Yrjönen (FCA).*



Therefore, Finn Church Aid (FCA), the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (The Network) and South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) organized a two-day consultative workshop in March 2024 in Juba inviting 30 religious leaders to discuss about the current situation in South Sudan, the challenges, successes, best practices, as well as lessons learned regarding the peace processes and the upcoming elections. Additionally, the discussions highlighted the religious leaders' and the church's needs and key recommendations on ensuring peaceful elections in South Sudan.

The workshop participants represented religious leaders from the Christian denominations, women of faith, youth of faith, the 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 also provided the opening and closing remarks to the workshop.

The findings and recommendations below come from the discussions that took place with the religious leaders during the workshop and while doing individual interviews with selected participants.

## Main Findings

**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 conflict escalation that might have implications also regionally. The situation in Sudan intensifies the fragility of the region, including South-Sudan even further.

**The Electoral Commission and other relevant institutions lack the resources and needed capacity to run the elections properly.** Religious leaders call for capacity building support and resources for the government and institutions. Religious and traditional leaders' resources should be utilized in election preparedness as well.

**Religious leaders have an impact on the people and the communities as they are trusted and have the needed legitimacy.** These leaders have the moral responsibility, and the Church has been able to sustain its nonpartisan role, therefore they are well positioned to work on reconciliation, to put forward peaceful messages and call for social cohesion. Church is also a place where trauma healing is taking place and peer support can be provided.

**Given their nonpartisan role, religious leaders have traditionally been able to act as trusted mediators between the conflicting parties at the national level.** In the lead-up to the elections, religious leaders can potentially support the rival parties in finding the needed political will to reach consensus on some of the key election related issues as prescribed by the R-ACRSS, and ensuring the hold-out groups join the R-ACRSS.

**If religious leaders and church are given the mandate and appropriate resources, they could support in the process and monitoring of free, fair, and peaceful elections.** These leaders are optimally positioned to conduct civic education and awareness raising on the Electoral Act and share information about the electoral processes and the civic rights related to voting. Religious leaders and the Church could also support in the elections monitoring of free, fair and peaceful elections.

**Religious leaders and the Church could have a significant role also in fighting against misinformation, as the church is often considered as a source of truthful messages and has a wide reach to the people.** This could be used for disseminating factual and non-biased messages related to the elections 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. Historically, women (of faith) have played a crucial role in the peacebuilding in South-Sudan, especially at the community level. They have joined forces and come together to advocate for women's role in peace work and conflict prevention. The R-ARCSS provides 35% women representation to all transitional

government institutions. However, the reality is still far from achieving gender equality. The quota is not consistently adhered to and equal participation of women, especially young women, in politics requires far more than affirmative action in government appointments.<sup>2</sup> **Therefore, women need support to ensure that the inclusive and progressive policies and commitments are translated into action by the relevant decision-makers.**

**The role of youth has been recognised, but concrete actions need to be taken to ensure the provision of services and education, as well as the meaningful participation of youth.** Youth represent more than 70 percent of the population of South Sudan therefore their inclusion is vital.

**Traditional leaders have significant influence in their respective communities.** For most South Sudanese, the concept of central national government and democratic system is a distant reality, with little to no influence on daily life. Therefore, traditional leaders are crucial in civic education and in sustaining peace. The collaboration between the religious and traditional leaders should be supported and their potential better understood.

The lack of funding and resources challenges the scale and effectiveness of peacebuilding and civic education that religious leaders can carry out. **Both financial resources and capacity building would enable religious leaders to work better to their full potential.** Additionally, stronger political support and recognition would enhance the impact and credibility of the religious leader's work.

## Recommendations

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 are to take place as planned, significant efforts are needed to prepare for and sustain the peace in South Sudan. The religious leaders have the capacity, legitimacy and reach to support in the peaceful electoral process. However, support from international community is needed:

- South Sudan's situation is severe and there is a high risk for conflict escalation as the elections are approaching. **Appropriate attention needs to be paid by the international community to support South Sudan in its efforts to organise its first elections since independence.**
- **Resources and capacity building are needed from the international community and donors** to help the government of South Sudan, the Electoral Commission and other relevant institutions to set up the required steps for the elections, elaborated and jointly agreed in the R-ARCSS and The National Election Act.
- **The international community needs to push for the Government of South Sudan to devote appropriate resources** to securing free, fair, credible, transparent and peaceful elections.
- The international community needs to closely **collaborate with the government of South Sudan to push forward the messages of good governance, inclusivity, free and fair elections and anti-corruption.**
- **Religious leaders need both technical and financial support** in their efforts for supporting peaceful elections and ensuring the meaningful inclusion of civil society and minority groups. The international community needs to recognize and support diverse South Sudanese civil society in their efforts for free, fair and peaceful elections.

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<sup>2</sup> Chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/suedsudan/20021-20230221.pdf

- **Religious leaders and the Church should be supported in forming unified position and sharing the key messages** towards the government of South Sudan as well as the international community. They will need help in ringing the bell!

The biggest worry of the religious leaders is how to sustain peace in South Sudan and how to prevent and manage violent conflicts from flaring up. The key messages from the religious leaders are clear and loud: South Sudan should never be taken back to war. When the elections take place, they need to be peaceful, fair and inclusive.

## 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.

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