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MILITARY LIVELIHOODS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY IN SOUTH SUDAN

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Introduction

South Sudan's last civil war – ignited in 2013 and formally ended in September 2018 with a 'revitalised' peace agreement – has been catastrophic in many ways.[1] Over five years, around 400,000 people have died, leaving nearly two thirds of the population suffering food insecurity, and forcing just over 4 million people from their homes.[2]

The peace hinges on an agreement that is unfinished, often ambiguous, and sparse on details and routes to long-term peace and reform.[3] The majority of its terms are the same as the original peace agreement signed in 2015 and broken in July 2016 with a new wave of violence and displacement. Most analysts now agree that the war was a result of deep militarised divisions and struggles for power within the newly independent country's political system of mercenary clients and regional military powers, carved out as an echo of Sudan's political market in 2005–2011 transition. Many are concerned that the current peace agreement is attempting to reconstruct the former financial and political balancing act, parcelling out power at the centre of economic and military control in Juba, and building a 'payroll peace' that is structured around buying out military factions and cash-for-loyalty alliances.[4] This rebalancing might buy short-term peace, but it incentivises recruitment to factional militias and the use of threats of rebellion to make personal claims on power.

This chapter puts this 'payroll peace' critique of South Sudan's elite military-political bargains into deeper political, historical and economic context. Many current analyses of South Sudan's military-political system – focused as they are on payrolls and state dividends – do not explain why men across the country are seeking incredibly small and unpredictable financial gains through armed work, in exchange for extreme personal and family risk.

The chapter focuses on three explanations of the continued militarisation of South Sudan's political economy. First, with few opportunities for waged labour, and little investment capital for small businesses, there are few personal possibilities for most of South Sudan's residents beyond scratching a bleakly resilient subsistence. There is little hope within the fragmented educational sector. The complex family economics of survival, for most residents, generally involves military work as well as seeking migrant labour and educative opportunities within and outside South Sudan. This includes military, security and militia employment, as well as self-arming or working in local auxiliaries and 'self-defence' or raiding groups, as part of personal economic strategies.

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Second, military work for the government and its political leadership is a South Sudan-specific form of social contract. For many residents, armed service involves government reciprocity and welfare, and is a core political responsibility: as salaries should be paid to old and disabled servicemen, and to widows as compensation for deaths in service. These are established and important forms of state reciprocity, but which have been jeopardised by the last civil war and economic crisis.

Third, many communities have organised militias and taken up arms because of actual societal and economic crisis, specifically the impact of commodification and expropriation of land and resources, and resulting injustices and gross inequalities. However, the real political and economic critiques within popular mobilisation and rebellion – particularly within South Sudan's rank and file, although also within the political elite – are generally overlooked.

This chapter draws on recent analyses of the failures of disarmament and demobilisation, and on wider emerging research on mobilisation, militarisation, and the moral parameters and workings of violence, in South Sudan. It also draws on interviews and meetings over 2017–2019 in South Sudan with members of armed factions and with other residents, and in north-western Uganda with recent refugees and supporters of the various armed factions in the Central Equatoria region. Its discussion demonstrates a common understanding across South Sudan's heterogeneous, traumatised and exhausted society: that a real response to the region's current crisis must stretch beyond state institutional reforms, power-sharing and elections, and necessitate fundamental economic and political reform within and beyond the state.

Current analyses of military and security reform

The provisions of the revitalised agreement include security and military reform, reintegration and demobilisation. The agreement's terms are relatively standard in post-conflict programming, and they have also been heavily critiqued by practitioners and researchers.[5] As Kasaija Apuuli emphasises, 'previous failures to reform the security sector are at the heart of the most recent chaos'.[6]

The history of disarmament, demobilisation and security sector reform in South Sudan has been well documented and well criticised.[7] Early attempts over 2005–2011 involved continued violence against local populations, re-recruitment because of the threat of inter-state war with Sudan,[8] slow implementation, mismanagement and corruption including within UN and international agencies,[9] uneven engagement and poor design.[10] The process grounds to a halt in April 2011 with only 12,525 people technically demobilised, about a third of the target of a $50 million budget.[11] Security reviews and reform plans have been left repeatedly unimplemented.[12] Other armed services including the police, fire and wildlife services were (and still are) a 'dumping ground' including for roughly 207,000 various militia fighters integrated into the SPLA after 2005.[13]

For South Sudan, most critiques of DDR programming from the last decade emphasise two core problems: first the problem of building a 'payroll peace', buying out military factions and thus incentivising both further recruitment and rebellion for profit; and second, how this neo-patrimonial buy-out system is made possible by the militarisation of governance in the country, and its undermining of any civil power and authority.

Recent international attempts to stop fighting have focused on attempting to buy people into peace, a 'payroll peace' in the words of the Conflict Research Programme: 'The practice of putting large numbers of soldiers and civil servants on the state payroll as an incentive for them, and the belligerent parties, to accept a peace agreement'.[14] This is essentially a neo-patrimonial analysis, where integration into state service is a reward for loyalty, and armed rebellion is the key route to renegotiating status and access to funds. These principles were established in the Juba Agreement in 2006, which allowed for the integration of anti-SPLA militias under the umbrella of Paulino Matip's South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF) into the national army and other armed services. Many men joined their local SSDF militias in 2005 and 2006 in the hopes of benefiting from this integration process. This was not a bad career option; in 2005, salaries were the equivalent of about $150 per month, raised to around $220 in 2011 – a good income in comparison to equivalents from agricultural smallholdings or manual labour. In 2006, 80% of defence spending was on salaries and allowances.[15] Recruitment continued, in response to tensions with Sudan over secession and the border, to manage competing and armed political factions through patronage, and for personal gain.[16]

This system – operating in both war and peace – has continued to fundamentally undermine civil authority, popular governance and accountability. This lack of clear civil authority is a fundamental issue within power structures in South Sudan over the last few decades. Many scholars and researchers point to the 'age-old militarisation of all facets of life and society'[17] as the root of continued mobilisation and violence. But what does this mean in practice? It is not *just* that the army was never properly integrated,[18] but as Kasaija Apuuli notes, 'the distinction between civilian and military authority has never existed' in the region, [19] and all key administrators from the county upwards have military ranks, and generally also military experience, often within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army's (SPLM/A) wartime rebel government. State infrastructure has been hastily built around older SPLM/A wartime command systems and regional military economies. This has perpetuated a fragmented military-civil service that operates dependent on personalities and personal efforts – including governors who control locally organised revenues and defence forces, often built on the old brigades and battalions that they led during the last civil war. 'Bodyguard' groups for ministers and other key advisors and VIPs expanded in competition, and with growing political tensions over 2012–2013. As such, defining a 'civilian area' of a town or region according to the Revitalised Agreement is difficult when so many families include military and security sector workers. Most serving soldiers are generally already 'off duty'[20] and balancing their sporadic army wages with agricultural work and small businesses. It is therefore hard to draw the line between active and 'reintegrated' armed workers. Many people are working on the fringes of this armed labour market: as unpaid, semi-retired soldiers, 'community police', informers, training ground workers and supply line staff.

This does not mean that there has never been security sector reform in post-2005 South Sudan. The military and security sector have been reformed multiple times, including several times since national independence in 2011. For example, the large 'border protection' militia forces in the former Northern Bahr el Ghazal and Warrap states, drafted over 2006–2012 in response to repeated border clashes and risks of war with Sudan, and locally termed *dut baai* ('protect the homeland') were reformulated as '*dut ke beny*' (protect the leader) forces loyal to President Kiir in mid-2013 with escalating political factionalism.[21] They became the core fighting force of Kiir's faction during the early fighting in Juba in December 2013 and during the resulting civil war, partly due to the defection or desertion of a large part of the pre-existing national army.[22] Since 2016, pro-government forces have again been reformulated. National security service personnel have been increasingly heavily engaged on front lines in the Equatorias and Upper Nile, particularly after the Mathiang Anyoor suffered heavy losses and defections over 2016.[23] Akol Kuur's internal security services are now equipped with military weapons, ranks and discipline, and also work to discipline new

SPLA recruits for instance in Yei in 2017 and 2018,[24] acting (in the words of an Equatoria IO organiser) as 'political police' within military units.[25] There is very little distinction between security and military sectors.

This recent history underlines, as Alex de Waal notes, that security and military reforms must start from a political analysis.[26] But it also emphasises other wider questions around the militarisation of South Sudan, and the importance of an economic analysis. South Sudan's population is bound up in an economy rooted in conflict and armed work. Most residents also need to protect themselves against the risks of an over-extended and violent military-security sector (even if they, or their relatives, work within it).

Understanding the political economy of armed work in South Sudan is vital for understanding the real challenges of military and security governance and reform. For example, there is a common idea in DDR work that if demobilising fighters are not paid off properly, they will turn to crime or further rebellion for self-support. The Conflict Research Programme (CRP) rightly notes that this is a dangerous logic, expanding 'peace' payrolls and patronage politics.[27] But it is also based on a lack of detailed analysis of how these armed men and their families can afford to live and survive in South Sudan's collapsing economy. Beyond a macro-economic focus on state budgets, corruption and oil production, analysis and data on the popular economy are extremely limited.

Second, there are real grievances involved in mobilisation and conflict at both local and national levels that are not captured by a straightforwardly rent-seeking analysis of patronage and cash flows. The real politics of localised exploitations, abuses, land alienation; an unresolved history of 70 years of historical war crimes; and the collapse of a consensus around South Sudanese citizenship and common government are all bound up in why people are fighting, on all sides.

An economy of armed work

For many South Sudanese residents, since the early 2000s, armed work has become a key form of paid labour.[28] Most people have very little opportunity to access the actually 'lucrative war economy' at the centre of power in Juba.[29] Most people's livelihoods depend on a combination of subsistence and small for-profit farming, insecure and informal petty labour, and small businesses and trade, all of which have been deeply destabilised by inflation since 2015 in particular, and by floods, displacement and violence. As several refugees in northern Uganda, and residents in Northern Bahr el Ghazal and Juba all noted, angry and often-traumatised young people are bored and frustrated, with extremely limited options for fulfilling their personal aspirations.[30]

In these circumstances, armed work is obviously not an ideal choice for many young men – as one man explained, 'being a military is the last work'[31] option – but many young men are turning to private security company or state military work, to the call-ups for national security training made by radio, to paid cattle-herding work for wealthy military men and maybe to rebel work. As one man in a refugee camp emphasised, 'why should I waste my time in the camp [if] any group of youth with guns can promote me to a rank?'[32] As Marielle Debos observed in Chad, for many young men with no investment nor social capital who are just working to keep themselves alive, going into rebel groups living in a forest is not a significant change in livelihood, and a viable socio-economic option.[33]

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There are also significant, if unpredictable, benefits to joining armed employment. This goes well beyond the extremely limited and unpredictable possible dividends of a DDR programme. The military and security sector are still paid more often than civil sector, and local detachments have been encouraged to self-fund through market monopolies and price fixing on key goods. These take various forms – such as the national security sector's monopoly on fuel distribution across Juba; SPLA and SPLM/A-IO sale and taxation of teak plantations and artisan gold-mining across the Equatorias; and the armed control of charcoal production and/or trade and taxation across the country.[34]

This creates a kind of economic coercion to recruitment (alongside the more infrequent use of conscription and coercion, for instance in Warrap in December 2018). There are very few career options for the majority of young men in South Sudan, so recruitment – particularly of unpaid teachers, or of farm labourers with no access to capital for their own start-ups or education – is a decent chance for some possible ongoing security and opportunity through sporadic salary payments and hopefully secondment to lucrative posts in customs or bodyguard duties, balanced against the risk of being sent to the 'front line'.

Skills and livelihoods programming will not change the fundamentals of this economy. Short-term training and small investment capital pots will not substantially change the prospects of the majority in saturated semi-skilled work markets. This is why, for instance, the National Salvation Front's declaration of rebellion in March 2017 involved a lengthy critique of how 'Kiir's government has overseen the steady decline of the production and wealth creation part of the economy'. Major economic change – as well as the more specific reforms needed at the centre of government finance – is at the heart of this military-economic system.

Military welfare and government service

Military employment is not just a form of paid work, however. Many people – at least in areas of the country where pro-government military service is still common[35] – understand military service as involving a form of social contract with the government, providing entitlements and social security in exchange for service.[36] This is why many people on the payroll are retirees, disabled and widows receiving salary benefits under their dead husband's name. Recruitment into the various security and military services therefore is a form of reciprocity between the state and its population.

This state social security has been fundamentally affected by the economic crisis and civil wars, and the government's failing to properly fund and support this system is a major point of criticism in government-controlled territory outside of Juba. Many residents of Northern Bahr el Ghazal complain that the government has failed to keep proper records of the dead in this latest war, has not returned bodies for proper burial and remembrance, or even notify families, and has not supported widows, disabled servicemen and orphaned children.

This criticism was even made by a group of Nuer youth in a northern Uganda refugee camp; they observed that the (Dinka) Mathiang Anyoor soldiers had no payment other than looting, and that many injured fighters had fled to the same refugee camps in poverty.[37] These are similar critiques of corruption and government failures to those made within the White Army groups, and emphasise how this system of government salaries and payments is 'less about clientelism, and more about … ethical reciprocity between political elites and rural communities': 'In contrast to this perceived injustice, White Army militias strove to uphold principles of reciprocity as they elected leaders and redistributed wealth'.[38]

These grievances are part of the reasons for President Salva Kiir's tour of greater Bahr el Ghazal in early 2019, during which he announced the reopening of several military training camps, and provided large donations of food aid and promises of widows' payments. This is not just to dispense, from the top down, some small cash benefits from the leaderships' 'political marketplace', but about fulfilling a common local understanding of what the government should be doing. Listening to this South Sudanese conversation about government responsibility complicates the description of military employment as a cash patronage system based on greed.[39]

Political and economic popular critiques

These popular grievances and criticisms of political and economic order have been strongly repressed by President Kiir's government, and this repression continued after the signing of the revitalised agreement in 2018. This has involved closing down civic space and militarising public life. As well as monitoring and controlling public and private conversations via national security clearance processes, Kiir's government has systematically undermined key civil institutions, including the judiciary, youth unions, universities and other forms of public culture, through direct threat as well as strategic underfunding. This has been useful for shutting down space for criticism, and thus stopping the development of alternative political ideas and movements.

However, of course, all male and female South Sudanese residents – including the military and security agents – are political beings,[40] and are engaged in a sustained South Sudanese political discourse that involves older ideas of liberation and democratic revolution, even if these 'ideas and ideologies that people went to the bush to fight for are lost'.[41] Discussions across South Sudan and in refugee camps often centre on questions of equality, rights and citizenship. A refugee camp resident emphasised: '[you] should be fighting for the civilians to be your people, not to destroy them. Some people tell themselves that they are 1st class people in South Sudan. Who is 2nd class then? And 3rd class?'[42]

These conversations are part of wider efforts within South Sudanese communities across the region to discuss, and to try to re-establish, shifting moral standards and societal norms, in the face of incitement to ethno-nationalist divisions and mutual violence. Ordinary people across the country are engaged in common acts of defiance and resistance that often go unseen by outsiders: including pushbacks against recruitments, inter-ethnic mutual support and aid, and memorialisation work (of recent and of 1960s wars and atrocities).[43] In the face of apparently disinhibited killing and common desires for retaliation and retribution, residents are exerting pressure to control behaviour and sanction misconduct, drawing on older local forms of ending conflicts and making restitution.[44] As Noel Stringham and Matthew Forney note:

> most Nuer-speakers (and most South Sudanese) still live in rural areas where communities have resisted warlords' assaults on their cohesion in creative ways. Women have organised in order to control local men and local captains in the civilian militias, known as bunomni, have grown more influential.[45]

Local communities are involved in intense discussions about how to deal with horrific abuses and incitement to violence. A group of refugees in northern Uganda explained how politicians and social media groups incited atrocious acts of violence in response to legitimate pain at, for instance, a baby's death by gunfire – 'what are you going to feel?!'[46] Revenge is by no means straightforward, and residents across South Sudan frequently ignore (or act against) inflammatory rhetoric or individuals inciting violence.[47]

In this context, becoming military and security – or becoming a rebel – is also way of getting space to speak, and perhaps to be listened to. Militarisation does not just give prominent politicians a seat at the negotiating table in Addis Ababa; it also gives ordinary residents voice, power and influence in a way that civil action does not. This is visible on South Sudanese Facebook, for instance, as defecting soldiers or rebel young men post or video record their explanations of the current political system and their material context. Many of these men demand real structural reform and 'fundamental change'.[48] Older SPLM/A-IO organisers in northern Uganda also emphasised this, discussing the unequal distribution of resources, intimidation and repression and a lack of freedom of expression, and the lack of rule of law over employment, opportunity and land.[49] A group of Nuer youth in their refugee camp in northern Uganda also appreciated their new space to speak: 'for us, we don't want Riek Machar, we don't just want to put him in power'; 'we want democracy, so we just can protest, peacefully'. They saw the current status quo as 'visionless leaders, who just want to be in power'.[50] 'We talk about good governance. The older think that if they are in power all the resources are yours and you can call yourself Beny [Dinka: big man]'.[51]

It is often emphasised that political reform must 'address the historical grievances of the people of South Sudan'.[52] This is not some kind of discrete psychological issue separate from the basic practicalities of cash and conflict. And these grievances are not just about this last civil war, but about three generations of unresolved violence and past wounds. These are exposed: people know where bodies are left unburied, where local atrocities occurred with no memorialisation nor proper funerals.[53] In conversation over the last year or so, SPLM/A-IO soldiers in northern Uganda (and diaspora South Sudanese in Oxford) have both returned to events of the 1960s, including the famed Anya-Nya internal battle at Balago Bindi in southwest Equatoria, to explain the depths of unfinished restitution. As Naomi Pendle notes,

> young, armed men still take risks to visit and make sacrifices on the gravesites of ancestors buried here. They go heavily armed. In preserving these material reminders of more peaceful pasts they are potentially providing an alternative imagining of the landscape.[54]

As such, in contrast to increasingly short-term (and unnecessarily expeditious) international programming and political pressures, many South Sudanese people are engaged in these conversations about inter-generational suffering and long-term reform. IO organisers in northern Uganda worried that the continued wars and their own recruitments were 'losing a generation', and that if 'we are only toppling the government and status quo remains, we have not changed anything'.[55] The issue for many people is rebuilding a 'broken social fabric', with some IO supporters talking about a plan for 2030.[56] But they are also aware that those in power are invested in replicating and entrenching the system that maintains their position, 'creating a cadre of youth to protect their political and business interests. … [We] need to break this wall'.[57]

Conclusion

This deeper view of the military economy in South Sudan raises fundamental questions about the nature of government, and what political community can and should be reconstructed. Most political analyses in the last few months assume that the state must reassert its power over military factions and a divided country. But South Sudan's current state – like successive regional governments since the colonial period – continues to be both weak and violent. There is barely any civic trust in the government and a relatively comprehensive fear of the security and military services across the country, essentially because of their ability to act with impunity. As a group of refugees in northern Uganda emphasised, this fundamental fear and distrust 'creates a gap between the government and the civilians – there is no unity' and no practical sense of citizenship in these circumstances.[58]

In this context, should – as Majak d'Agôot asserts – 'the monopoly of legitimate means of coercion… meaningfully revert to the state'[59] at the moment? What role can the South Sudanese state realistically have in protecting citizens when it does not have a social compact or trust from the majority of the population? Is it realistic, or desirable, for South Sudan's often-brutal and fundamentally authoritarian state apparatus to achieve a real monopoly on violent order in current circumstances?

Conversations with South Sudanese residents, military men, refugees and rebels alike suggest that answers to these questions rely on interconnected political, economic and societal structural change. Men and women both emphasise the need for real futures for children and young people, beyond subsistence and military work; and in order to provide this, societal contracts with the government, ideas of citizenship and mutual trust must be rebuilt, and people must allow themselves to be held to account. It is unrealistic to pursue a 'new' government via elections and power-sharing unless these fundamental questions are answered.

To have these critical conversations, as Majak notes, requires 'the existence of a civil space' in the first place; without civil space, South Sudanese-driven civic institutions, open governance reforms and economic change cannot take root.[60] This civil space cannot be made from the top down, via a UN protectorate or by another round of strategic reviews, and it cannot be made by an allegedly 'apolitical' and economy-blind peace-building sector. Without open civil space, many people will continue to seek the ability to speak through armed mobilisation or through flight elsewhere.

Notes

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47 Including organising political education within Central Equatoria IO units: IO spokesman, Arua, 25 February 2017.

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