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Why peace agreements in South Sudan intensify the war economy

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Since becoming an independent country in 2011, a military elite has strengthened its hold on power in South Sudan, emboldened by Western governments and donors wilfully ignorant of its history. Charting the role of security services since the end of civil war in 2005, Joshua Craze explains why peace processes in South Sudan have failed to end the country's wars, instead only intensifying the war economy.

This post is based on a [new report](#) published by the [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#) at LSE's Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa.

I often travel around the world briefing governments on the progress of South Sudan's latest peace agreement. At the beginning of 2020, it seemed like there was good news to tell. In March, after eighteen months of delays, South Sudanese President Salva Kiir announced a transitional government that included his armed opposition partners. Yet almost immediately violence

flared in Jonglei state and rebels defected to the government in Western Bahr el Ghazal, leading to clashes there and elsewhere in the country. Diplomats in capitals in the Global North wanted to know: what was going on?

The international community assumes that peace is the opposite of war, and that all its efforts should be put into supporting the peace process. This assumption is wrong. As I show in a report published with LSE's Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa, *The Politics of Numbers*, this violence is not despite the existence of the peace process, but because of it. Let me explain.

In 2011, when South Sudan seceded from its northern neighbour, the international community treated the world's newest country as a *tabula rasa*: a new state needed to be built. This claim meant, as Eddie Thomas **has noted**, that the NGOs and donors that flooded into Juba, South Sudan's capital, did not feel they had to learn anything about the country they had deigned to help. In reality, this wilful ignorance of South Sudan's history allowed the international community to be instrumentalised by a military elite that had taken shape during Sudan's twenty-two year-long civil war.

During this war, military commanders had enriched themselves by looting cattle and other resources from civilians, and by using aid flows to control populations and acquire food aid. These commanders constituted a new class in South Sudan, and their activities during the second civil war transferred wealth from an immiserated population to what Clémence Pinaud **has called** a military aristocracy.

With the signing of the peace agreement between warring factions in 2005, this class found itself newly emboldened, as oil revenues and donor funds largely supplanted looting and food aid as the means by which it could reward its followers and accrue wealth. The capital that donors and the Troika – the United States, the United Kingdom and Norway – poured into South Sudan did not go into establishing a state, but instead intensified existing divisions within the country. For instance, in Upper Nile state, a military elite close to the government in Juba directed NGOs to construct medical clinics that would benefit their supporters, and not other ethnic groups, **inflaming tensions on the ground**. While 'state-building' seemed to be occurring, political positions in county and state-level institutions were actually offered as rewards to figures

within the military aristocracy. In South Sudan, what seemed to be a process of creating unity actually created further divisions.

The army, the country's sole viable institution following the end of the second civil war, was massively expanded thanks to oil funds. Rival parts of the military aristocracy were bought off with ranks and wages, in a process that the LSE's Conflict Research Program has called '**Payroll Peace**'. As Edward Lino, a former leading member of the South Sudanese ruling party who passed away in April 2020, **explained**:

'SPLA has never been a robust united force since we started to incorporate militia into it in appalling numbers. Each formation taken was not fully absorbed, in reality. But was left to wonder [*sic*] in uniform commanded by their previous untrained jihadist officers. Each soldier was almost free to take whoever to choose to be commander! ... In reality, there was nothing called 'SPLA'! It was divided and shredded into tribal formations adhering to individual commanders, based on localized tribal understanding.'

All around South Sudan, supposedly state-building processes intensified antagonisms between groups, and solidified the power of the second civil war's military aristocracy, rewarding commanders close to the government and antagonising those from more marginal communities, which did not see any of the vast amounts of money pouring into Juba. The state was a fantasy dreamed about by an international community marooned in the capital, remote from the reality of the country.

By 2013, the system was exhausted. The army was so bloated by militia members and ghost soldiers – put on the payroll to maximise commanders' access to wages – that the military elite in Juba had already begun to divest from the central army and build up its own mono-ethnic militias under direct control from the Office of the President. As oil revenue collapsed following the shut off of its pipe-line to Sudan in 2012, the elite in Juba became increasingly closed around Salva Kiir, and by December of that year the country was at war.

The outbreak of violence shocked the international community, but in reality, the current civil war has only brought an intensification of a process that was always underway during the peace agreement period from 2005–13. Rather than oil revenues, the military aristocracy has returned to looting and

manipulation of aid resources as some of the central means of acquiring wealth. Another fecund source of resources are peace agreements.

All of the peace agreements signed since the beginning of the current civil war have been Juba-dominated elite-level power-sharing agreements. In order to get a seat at the table, one requires armed forces. So, in order to participate in international-sanctioned peace agreements, rival armed factions recruit civilians. During negotiations they subsequently jostle for control of lucrative government ministries. Those left out of the process have no choice but to go to back to the battlefield in order to regain a place at the table.

This is what happened after Kiir announced his transitional government in March 2020. The losers went back to battle; the winners used their positions to loot and punish their enemies. The war continued, except this time it was called peace.

Photo: UN Security Council delegation arrives in South Sudan, 2016. Credit: UNMISS licensed under creative commons (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

About the author



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Joshua Craze is a writer who has recently published work with N+1, the Guardian and Codastory. He had a Ph.D. in socio-cultural anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, and has also taught at Sciences-Po Paris and the University of Chicago. For the last decade he has been doing fieldwork in South Sudan.

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