

Summary

Incumbent President Salva Kiir, head of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), Vice-president Riek Machar, leader of the SPLM in Opposition (SPLM-IO), and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) are expected to participate in elections scheduled for December 2024. Due to various reasons, the SPLM-IO and opposition groups have called for the postponement of the election, while the SPLM has begun preparations. Disagreements over how to proceed could cause violence between factions of the army, and civil unrest in Juba. Demonstrations are likely to be repressed by authorities.

Recent events and developments

South Sudan is set to hold general elections in December for the first time since its independence in 2011. Incumbent President Salva Kiir, who heads the SPLM, Vice-president and leader of the SPLM-IO, Riek Machar, and the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) are expected to participate. The election has been postponed on multiple occasions due to civil conflict, and as of now, opposition groups have warned that the country is not ready for elections. The greatest impediments to viable elections include the lack of a constitution and national census, limited independent oversight bodies, and wide scale corruption. Riek Machar's SPLM-IO and the SSOA have called for the election to be delayed until a new constitution is agreed upon and a national census carried out. President Kiir and the National Elections Commission have begun preparations for the election, seeming intent on going forward. Additionally, South Sudan continues to suffer from frequent instances of intercommunal violence. In February, over 150 people were killed in fighting in the Warrap, Lakes, and Western Bar El Ghazal States. From October to December 2023, over 406 civilians were killed in communal violence in South Sudan. Several instances were cases of infighting within the army between factions of different ethnic loyalties. Although South Sudan boasts a strong civil society, opposition leaders, civil society leaders, and journalists are regularly threatened with violence or detention. In February 2023, a prominent opposition critic, Morris Awikjok was detained for "defamation". He remains imprisoned as of the writing of this report.

Impact assessment

While South Sudan's parties remain in negotiations in Nairobi over how to proceed, the election is likely to take place if no alternative arrangement is agreed upon. The UN has warned in March that if not managed properly, the election could result in "disastrous consequences". Intensified fights over resources, high unemployment, political competition among the ruling elite, and the return of some 400,000 South Sudanese refugees from Sudan are potential exacerbating factors which could spike intercommunal violence, which is already on the rise. Tensions between the largely ethnically Dinka SPLM, and the Nuer SPLM-IO, which remain from the 2013-2020 civil war, could be inflamed if disagreements remain over how and when to carry out the election. Salva Kiir, who has been in power in 2011, is likely to look to solidify his rule, which is made further possible by the lack of presidential term limits. The commencement or postponement of elections could cause civil unrest and political violence between supporters of the SPLM, and supporters of the SPLM-IO and SSOA. Besides the potential for factional splits in the national army, security forces are highly likely to crack down on political demonstrations. Civil society leaders, opposition figures, and journalists perceived as critical of the government are likely to be threatened with violence and/or detention. NGOs supporting civil society leaders could too be purposely targeted or become victims of collateral damage. Attacks on local humanitarian aid workers are likely to continue, or even increase given the severe strain on resources and continuing intercommunal violence; South Sudan has seen the most deaths of local humanitarian workers globally.

Advice from Forth Global

- Advise staff traveling to South Sudan to undertake a several days long HEAT training prior to travel.
- Monitor local news and communicate with local partners to remain updated on developing events.
- Avoid demonstrations, large gatherings of people, and the expression of opinions on the political situation.
- Cooperate with security forces and authorities.

Customized advice

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