



Policy Brief on Elections: National Survey on Perceptions of Peace in South Sudan

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The views in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the views of Detro, USIP, AF/SSS, or FCDO.

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Key Findings

- ▶ South Sudanese want to vote, and they overwhelmingly want to vote soon. Data collected before the announcement of the extension of the transitional period demonstrates strong support for elections in 2023.
- ▶ Most likely, elections will be approached in community-voting patterns. While individual voting has strong backing in theory, South Sudanese still prefer their families and communities to vote the same way.
- ▶ Elections are likely to support and sustain the political status quo. The combination of party popularity and voting behaviour suggests that decisive changes to the political system are not going to happen, at least not through the voting process.
- ▶ Elections are likely to deepen polarisation along ethno-political lines, even though an overwhelming majority of South Sudanese would be willing to circumvent ethno-political voting behaviour at an individual level.
- ▶ The popularity of the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) strongly depends on performance, especially in terms of local security and service delivery. The political opposition has not yet been able to present credible voting alternatives that would be likely to perform well in upcoming elections.

Introduction

National elections are meant to be the endpoint of South Sudan's political transition. The revitalized peace agreement, R-ARCSS, foresees the holding of elections 60 days before the end of the transitional period. As preconditions, the transitional government should have reviewed and amended the Political Parties Act and the National Elections Act from 2012, reconstituted the National Election Commission, conducted a census, and adopted a Permanent Constitution, which would regulate the role and composition of the legislative and the executive.

These requirements, partly necessary preconditions for any legitimate and credible election process, have not yet been implemented, even though the extension of the pre-transition period added several months to the timeline. The discussions in the Revitalized Transitional National Legislative Assembly (R-TNLA) about the Political Parties Act resulted in severe disruption, with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) boycotting parliament sittings after the Political Parties Act Amendment Bill was passed by the TNLA. The minimum number of party members – 500 in each State and 300 in each of the three Special Administrative Areas – were fiercely rejected by the SPLM-IO, which complained about a closing down of political space linked to the election-related bills.

Since there was no chance that the transitional government would implement the preconditions for conducting elections, together with a number of other transitional tasks, before the end of transitional period in February 2023, the R-ARCSS signatories, on 4 August 2022, agreed on an extension of the transitional period by 24 months to February 2025. National elections are now scheduled for December 2024.

This policy brief sheds light on South Sudanese perceptions of the upcoming elections. The findings are based on a public opinion survey conducted in three waves in October 2021, February 2022, and June 2022. Data collection was completed before the extension of the transitional period was announced, and when these questions were asked, elections were still scheduled for late 2022/early 2023. The extension of the transitional period is, therefore, not reflected in the results.

Methodical Note

The three-wave survey recorded the views of 8,843 people from 12 counties across 9 states and special administrative areas, covering urban, rural and IDP camp environments.¹ Respondents were asked questions about their daily experiences of safety, based on indicators of everyday peace developed through focus groups.² They also shared their views on a wide range of governance topics, from power sharing to the implications of army unification.

General Views on Elections

Respondents' general attitude towards elections is one of ambivalence. Respondents overwhelmingly want elections to happen, and they want to hold them sooner rather than later. However, an overwhelming majority also sees elections linked to a considerable risk of violence. Over 85 percent of respondents said that elections would make them feel hopeful (40.8% strongly agree / 45.6% agree). At the same time, almost half of respondents said that elections make them feel afraid (15.8% strongly agree / 31.6% agree). These responses already show the ambivalent perceptions towards elections: 40 percent of respondents agree with both statements, thus saying that elections make them both hopeful and afraid.

The transition narrative, whereby elections would mark the final step of peace agreement implementation, appears to resonate. Over 80 percent of respondents agreed that elections are going to pave the way for peace in the country (33.9% strongly agree / 50.8% agree). In qualitative discussions, these general perceptions were often linked to the idea of legitimacy: better to have violent and disruptive elections that produce a formally legitimized government, than to continue with the current power-sharing arrangement that results from the R-ARCSS negotiations. This view reflects broader challenges related to fundamental constitutional questions. As our policy brief on security and governance shows, South Sudanese are split on whether elections should produce a winner-takes-it-all government, or whether power-sharing and consociational arrangements should continue.

Contrary to expectations, many South Sudanese have participated in election processes. Seventy percent of respondents said they participated in the 2010 Sudanese general elections – although there is a considerable gender disparity among respondents (76.9% of men, but only 64.2% of women). Forty percent participated in earlier elections or in national elections of other countries. Half of the respondents have also been involved in elections of traditional authorities, and these experiences are also strongly influenced by gender (60.9% men have been involved, compared to 40.6% women).

Figure 1: When should elections in South Sudan happen?

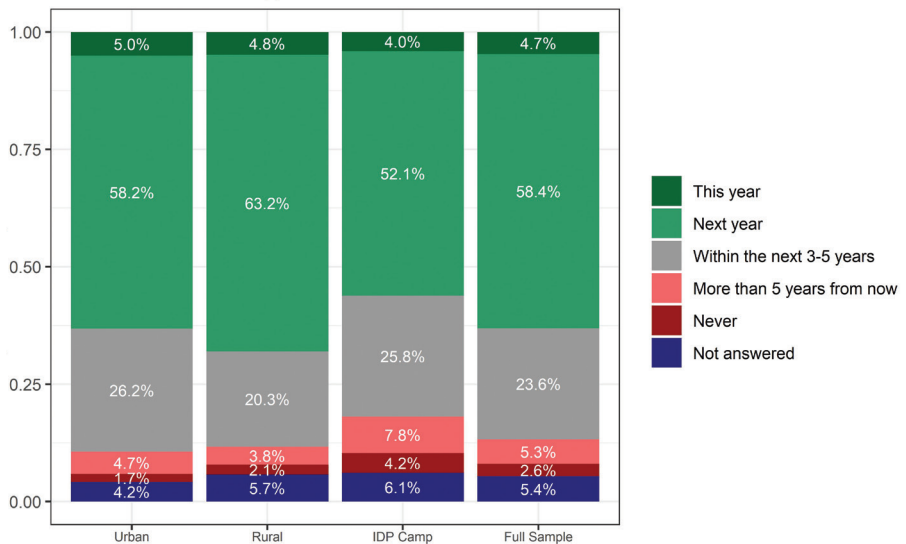
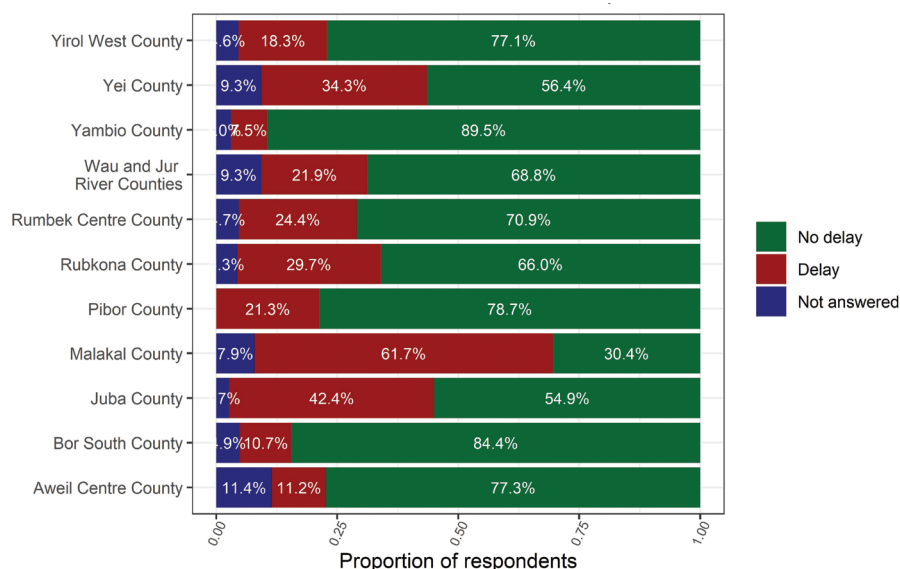
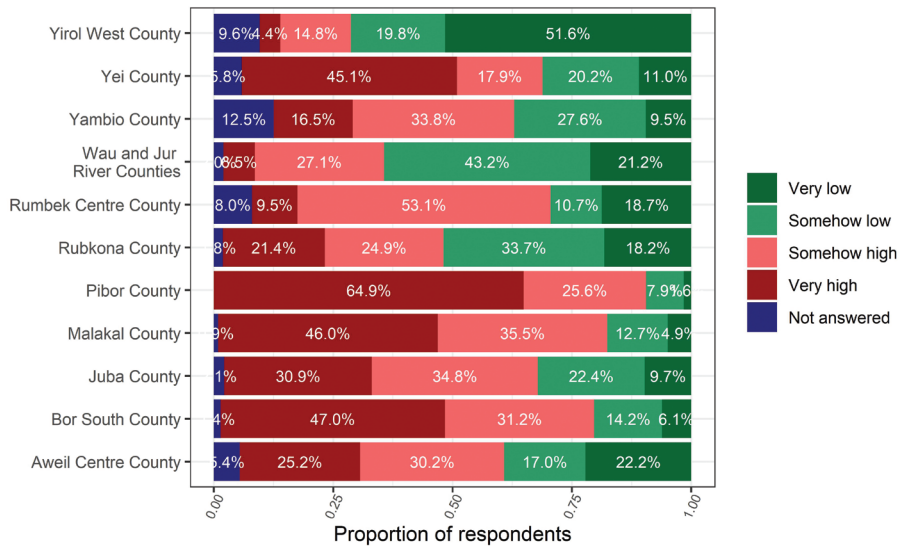


Figure 2: When should elections in South Sudan happen, disaggregated by county



Before the extension of the transition period was announced, South Sudanese strongly favoured holding elections in 2023. Only a minority (23.6%) would have preferred prolonging the transitional period in the form that has now been agreed upon (Figure 1). However, results vary widely according to location (Figure 2). In general, counties that are politically (and often, violently) contested favoured a delay: examples are Malakal County in Upper Nile, Yei River Country in Central Equatoria, and Rubkona County in Unity State. These counties are among the most conflict-affected places in South Sudan. It is, therefore, logical that the populations in these areas would want to avoid further triggers of violence. Respondents in places that are more stable were overwhelmingly against a postponement.

Figure 3: Perceived risk of election violence in counties



However, the reverse assumption, whereby places that assess the risk of election violence to be high would prefer a postponement, is not necessarily true. While data from Malakal, Yei, Rubkona, and Juba would support such an argument, locations such as Bor South County in Jonglei and Pibor County in the neighbouring Greater Pibor Administrative Area run against it. Bor and Pibor are among the places with the highest perceived risk of election violence in the country (Figure 3), which is hardly surprising given the history of conflict in the region. Still, respondents in both counties were clearly opposed to a delay in elections. These views appear to confirm the long-lasting political discontent with the political dispensation at the national level in Greater Jonglei.

Figure 4: How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to the elections?

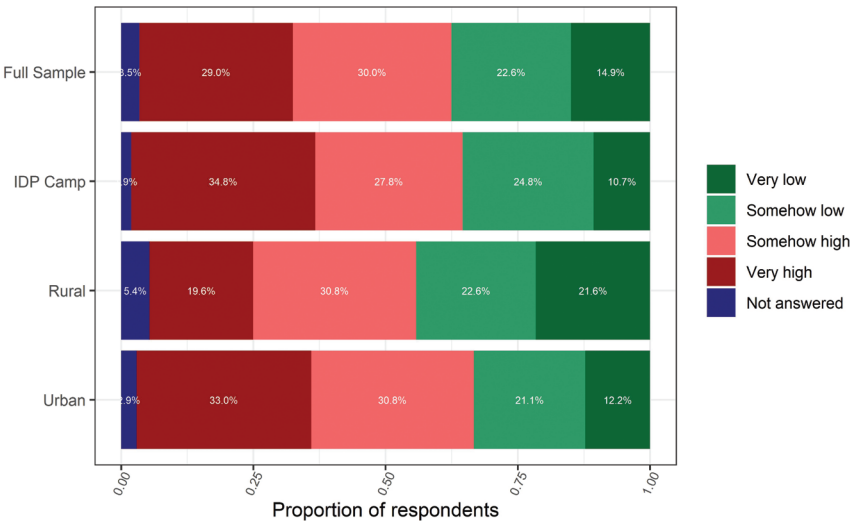
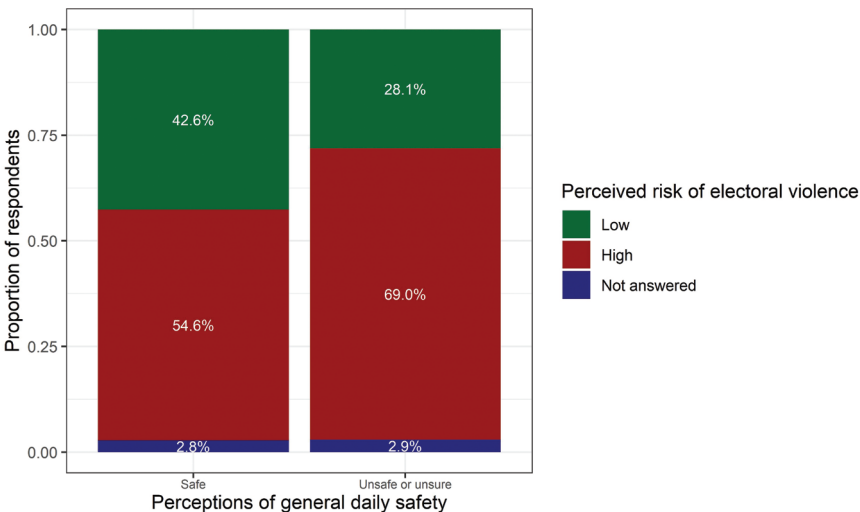
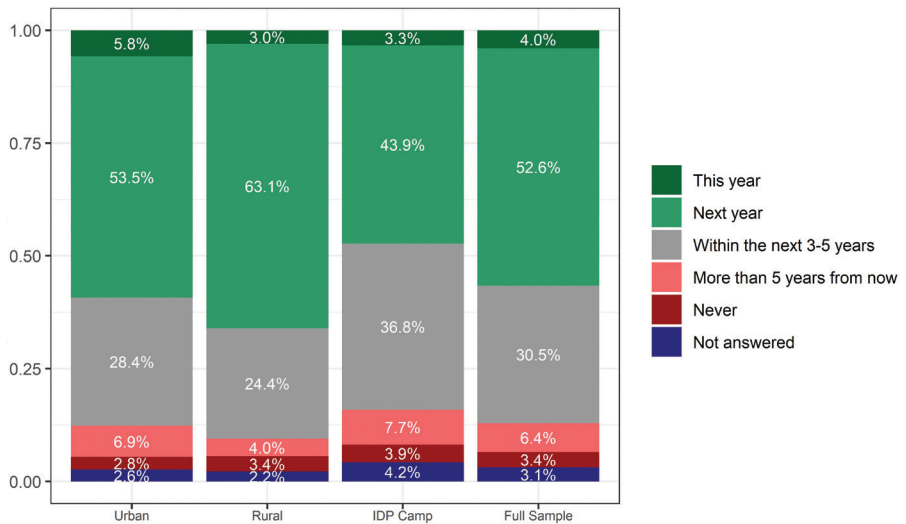


Figure 5: Risk of violence in relation to elections, depending on their perceived safety



Overall, 60 percent of respondents said the risk of election-related violence is somewhat or very high. This perception is influenced by respondent perceptions of safety. Among respondents that felt unsafe or unsure about their safety, 72.5 percent saw the risk as somewhat or very high. This is hardly surprising, though the consequences of these perceptions are less clear. As explained above, a perceived high risk of election violence does not necessarily translate into a desire to postpone the elections. Figure 6 shows that even among respondents assessing the risk of election violence as very high, a solid majority opted for holding elections sooner rather than later. These findings suggest that the motives behind the wish for postponement are either political in nature or related to the mid-term consequences of elections. In other words, these respondents appeared to not be so concerned with the risk of pre- or post-election violence in the short-term, but a resurgence of the civil war in the longer-term.

Figure 6: When should elections in South Sudan happen? By Respondents that assess the risk of election violence as 'very high'



Approaches to Elections and Voting Patterns

One of the less debated issues around national elections in South Sudan is how the electorate would approach them. Naturally, voting behaviour is significantly influenced by electoral procedures, which are part of a constitutional discussion and, therefore, far from being decided in the South Sudanese context. Questions of first-past-the-post versus possible applications of a D'Hondt power-sharing formula, in particular, will have a huge impact on tactical voting behaviour. However, it appears clear that a presidential system in which the president, state governors and county commissioners would be directly elected will be given preference in South Sudan. These direct elections probably are what respondents had in mind when answering the questions on their preferred approach to elections.

Bloc voting, in which communities vote overwhelmingly for the same candidates, is common in several neighbouring countries. Respondents, in general, approached bloc voting in an ambivalent way. The vast majority (85.6%) agreed that voting should be an individual choice. At the same time, 47.1 percent of respondents said that all members of their family should vote the same way, and 45.4 percent said that their community should vote the same way (Figure 7). Obviously, there is considerable overlap between those agreeing to both options of individual and collective voting behaviour. For instance, 88% of respondents arguing for community voting, at the same time, also saw voting as their individual choice.

Figure 7: Voting preferences

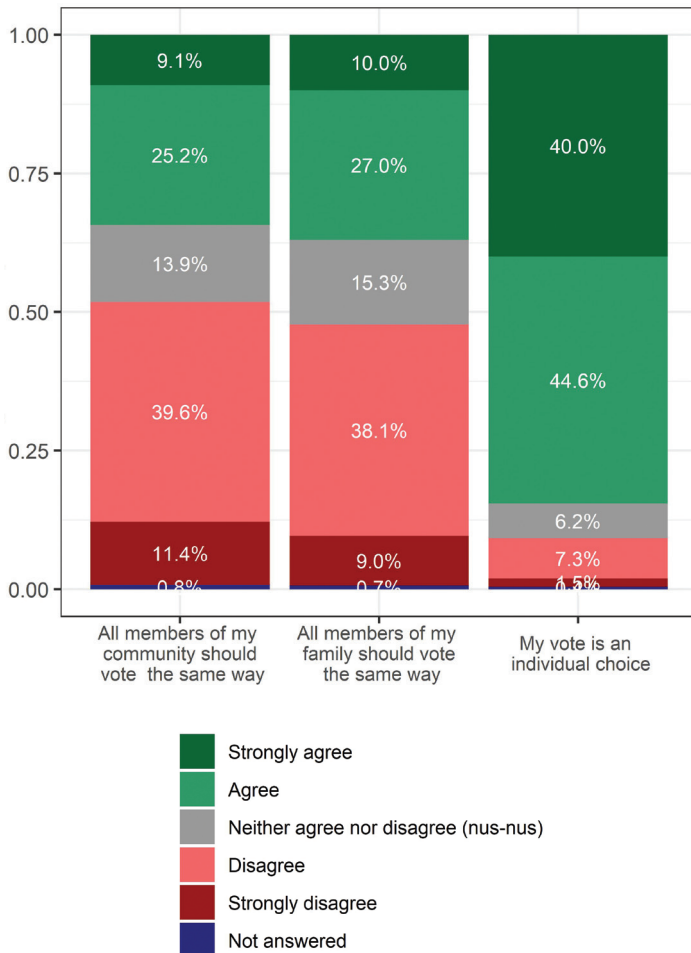
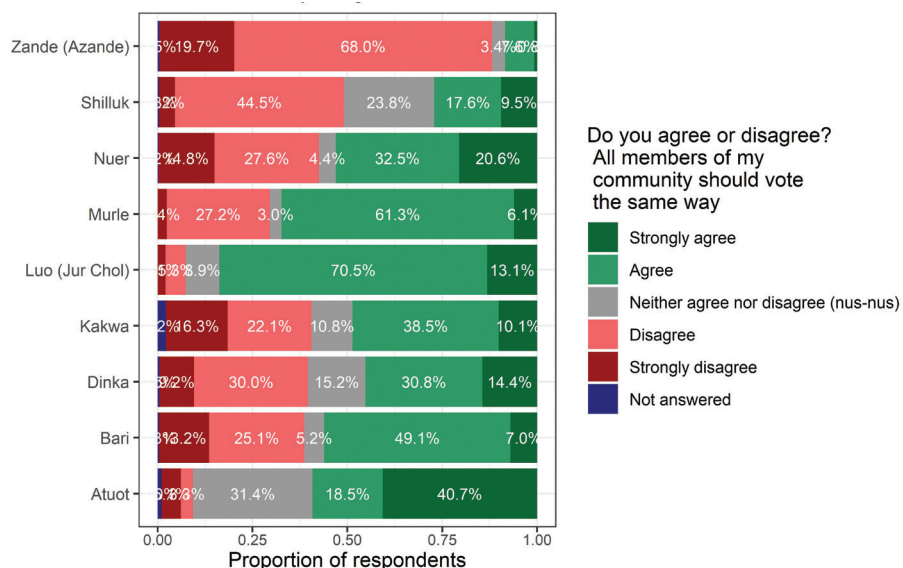


Figure 8: Views on community voting



The preferred approach to elections varied significantly depending on ethnolinguistic affiliations (Figure 8). A comparison of ethnolinguistic groups for which a sufficient number of responses could be collected, preference for community voting varies from almost 80 percent among Luo to less than 10 percent among Zande. Interestingly, the communities with the least preference for community voting were also those with some the strongest traditions in centralized governance in South Sudan: Zande and Shilluk.

In contrast, ethnopolitical affiliations do not appear to be the main factor in decision-making. Figure 9 shows that a healthy majority, 73.3 percent, appeared to be willing to vote for a political leader from another ethnic group (35% strongly agree, 38.3% agree).

Figure 9: Do you agree or disagree? 'I would vote for a political leader from another ethnic group'

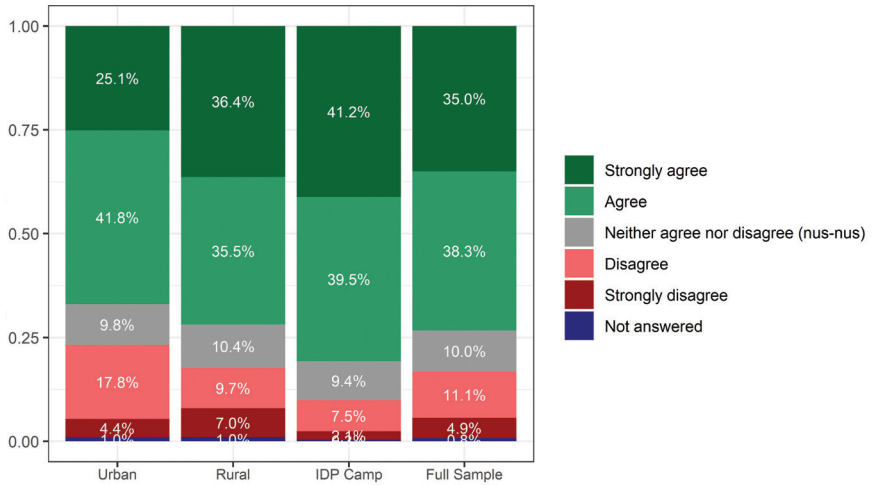
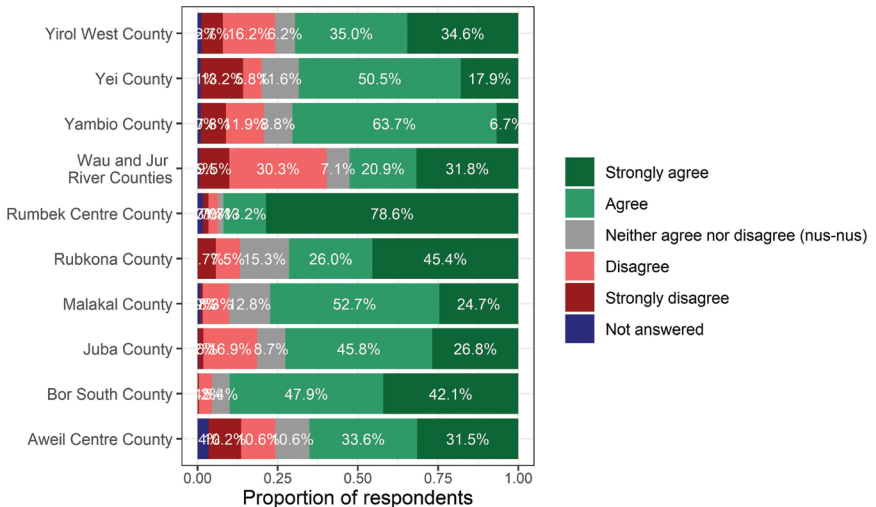


Figure 10: Do you agree or disagree? 'I would vote for a political leader from another ethnic group.' By Location



Party Popularity

The survey did not pose direct questions about the popularity of political parties or individual candidates due to the sensitivity of these questions in the South Sudanese context. Instead, respondents were asked which political party has the best vision for South Sudan, which can serve as a proxy for party popularity, both in the current context and in relation to possible elections. Respondents were asked to choose one party from a list of registered political parties, peace agreement signatories and formal armed groups. Respondents were explicitly prompted to answer with 'none' if they thought that none of the current political parties offers a compelling vision.

Figure 11: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan?

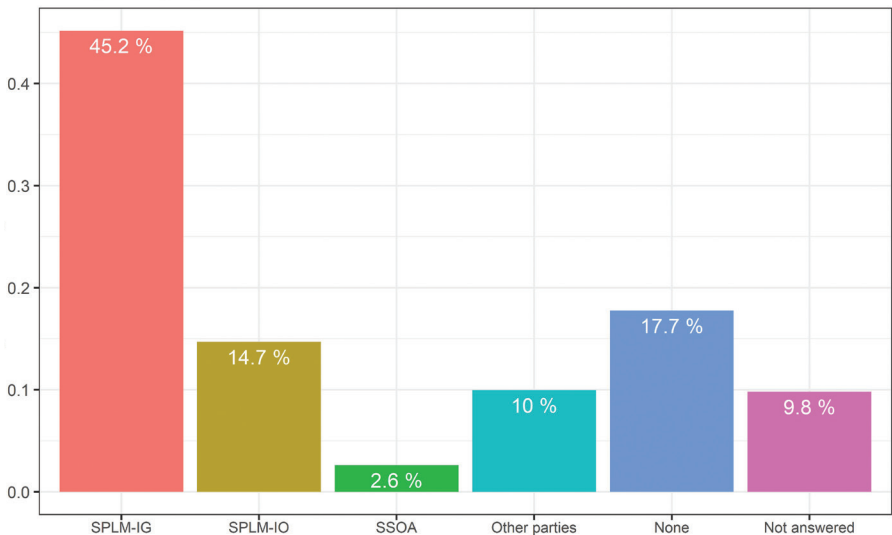
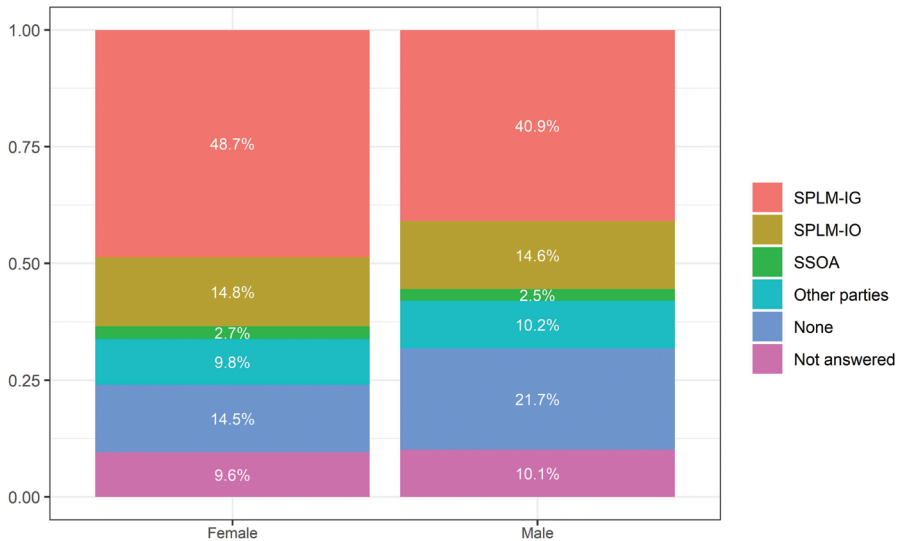


Figure 12: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? By Gender



Overall, the incumbent faction of SPLM that has been in power throughout the war (SPLM-IG) dominated the responses, with 45.2 percent of respondents saying that it had the most compelling vision for South Sudan (Figure 11). The absence of a strong national opposition was equally apparent. The SPLM-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) came in second with 14.7 percent of responses. This was just a few percentage points less than 'none', which was selected by 17.7 percent of respondents. The South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) was the only other faction that garnered a significant amount of support at the national level, with 2.6 percent of total responses. The large number of respondents who said that no political parties had a compelling vision for the country combined with the considerable number of non-responses (9.8%) shows a concerning level of political dissatisfaction. More than a quarter of respondents, in their own assessment, were politically homeless. Interestingly, party preferences were not significantly influenced by gender (Figure 12).

Figure 13: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? Among respondents in IDP camps

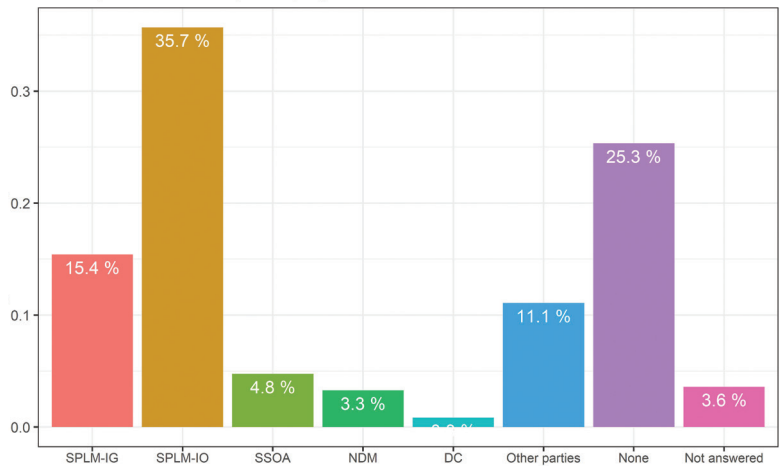
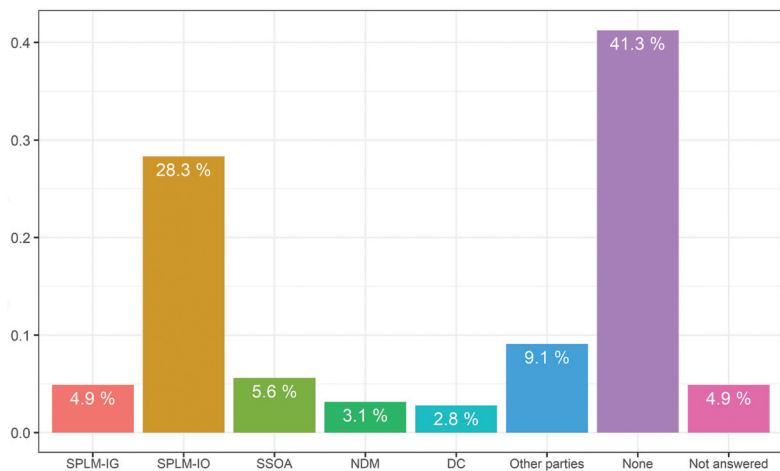
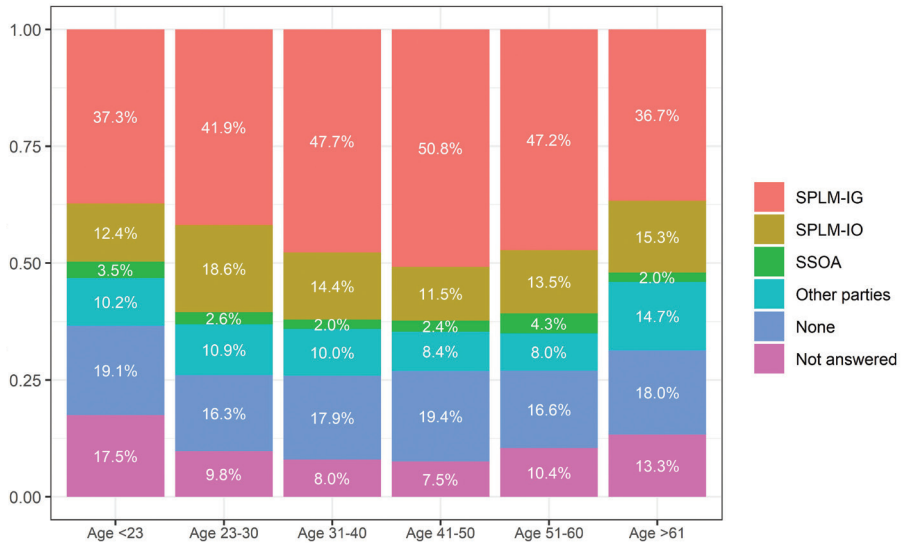


Figure 14: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? Among respondents in Malakal POC camp



The overall numbers, however, are contrasted by highly diverse disaggregated results. As expected, the SPLM-IG was considerably less popular in the IDP and former POC sites. There, the SPLM-IO was the by far most popular faction (Figure 13), which is hardly surprising given their political dominance in the transitioned POC sites in Juba and Bentiu. In general, the political landscape in IDP camps is more diverse than it appears in the overall numbers. This is mainly due to the remaining POC site in Malakal, where political viewpoints were highly diverse (see Figure 14).

Figure 15: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? By age group



Disaggregating the results by age reveals that no clear political competitor emerged among the respective age groups, with 'none' being the most likely alternative to the SPLM-IG (Figure 15). The SPLM-IG appears to be less popular among young and older respondents and to have their primary constituency among middle-aged respondents between the ages of 30 and 60. The decline in popularity among people over 60 is an especially concerning sign as those individuals experienced the whole life span of the SPLM as a political movement. Nonetheless, as suggested by the overall trends, no clear political competitor emerged among the respective age groups, with 'none' being the most likely alternative to the SPLM-IG.

There was a strong correlation between the popularity of a party's political vision and respondents' perceived safety (Figure 16). The popularity of the SPLM-IG positively correlates with perceived safety, from 62.4 percent among respondents who feel safe to 17.7 percent among respondents that feel unsafe. This suggests that SPLM-IO seems to command more popularity in areas that are less safe. In any case, the numbers imply that the popularity of political parties is closely tied to the delivery of public goods and services, with the provision of local security being a critical one.

The results in individual counties were highly diverse. They confirm that, while the SPLM-IG appeared to be in firm control of national 'first-past-the-post' election processes, they would risk losing considerable influence at state and county level compared with the current power-sharing arrangement provided by the R-ARCSS framework.

Figure 16: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? By perceptions of daily safety

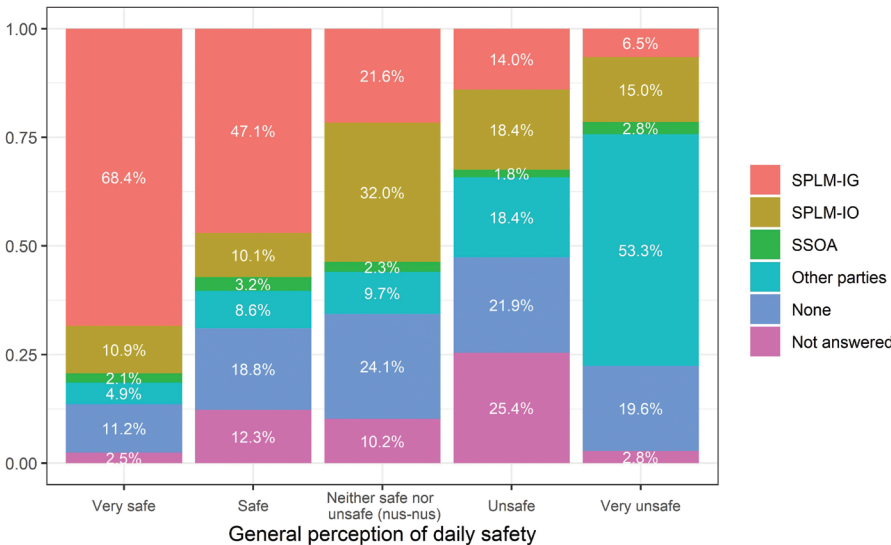
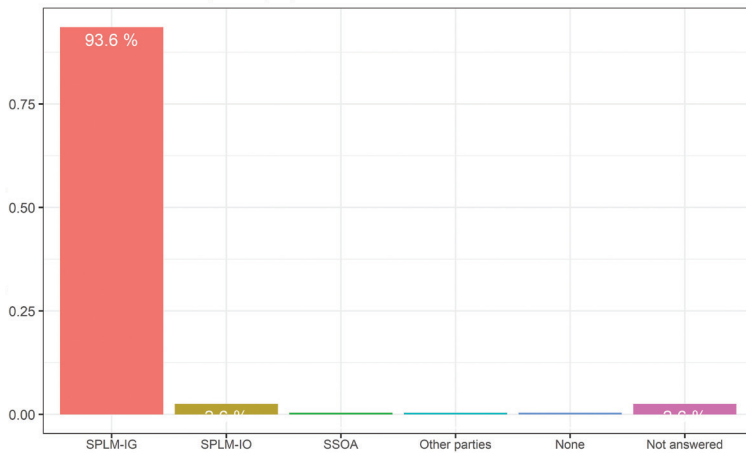
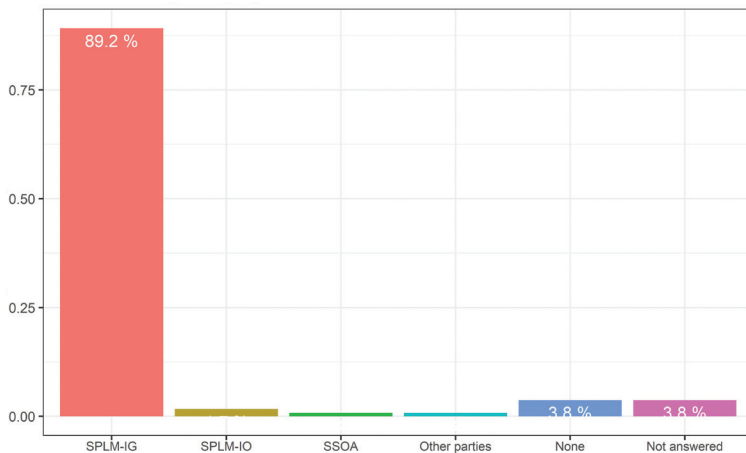


Figure 17: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? (Rumbek Centre, Yirol West, Aweil Centre, Bor South, Wau, Jur River)

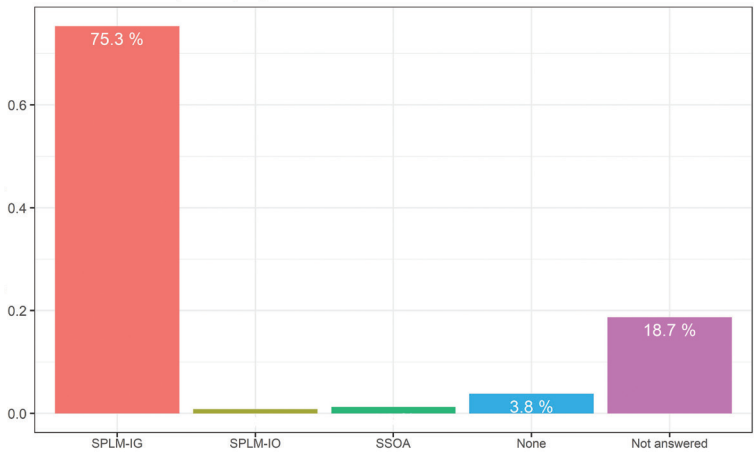
Rumbek Centre



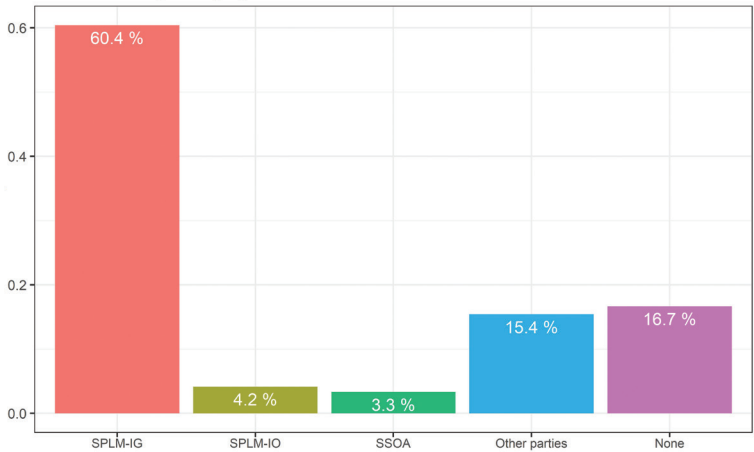
Yirol West



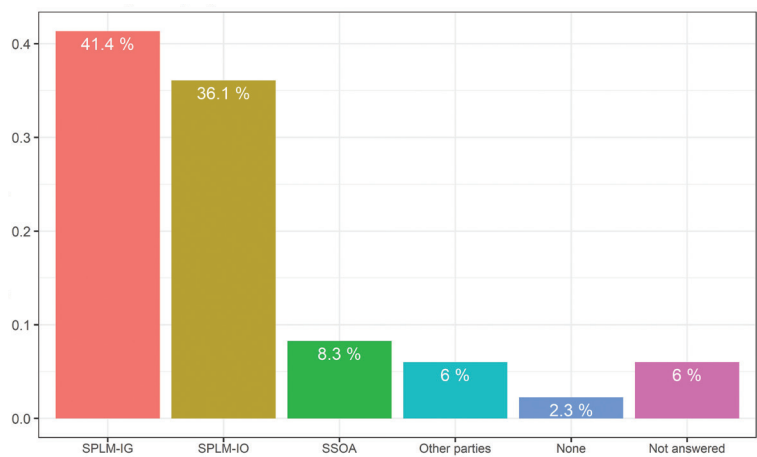
Aweil Centre



Bor South



Wau



Jur River

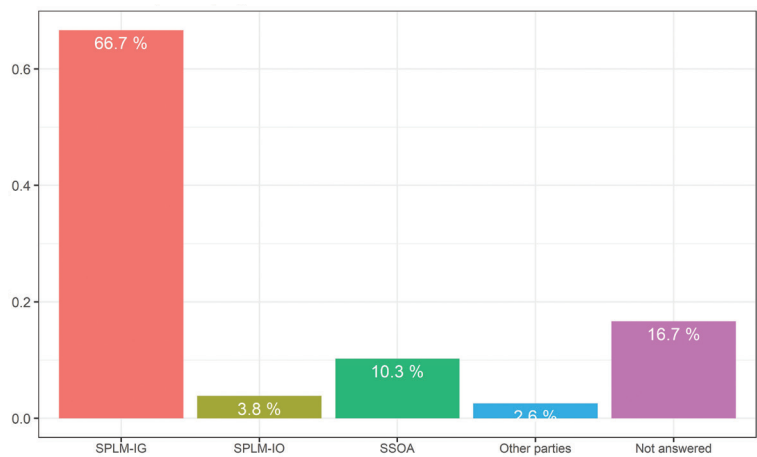
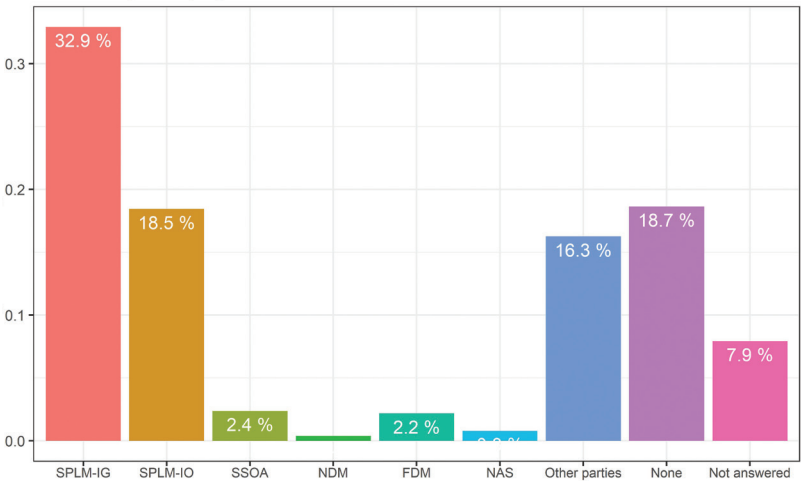


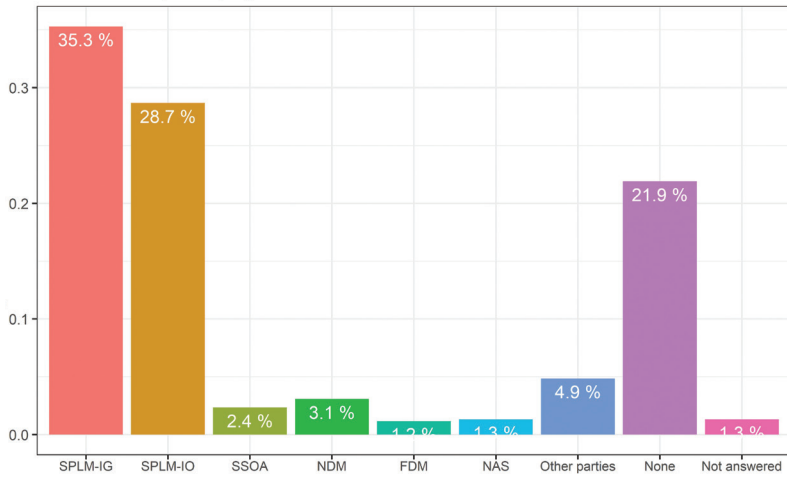
Figure 17 shows results in counties with a considerable SPLM-IG majority in terms of political vision. The results from Lakes State in which more than 90 percent of respondents preferred SPLM-IG. These results reflect the popularity of Governor Riin Tuenny Mabor, appointed in 2021, and his heavy-handed approach to combating intercommunal violence in the state. More surprising is the substantial popularity of the SPLM-IG in Bor South, even though this might contrast strongly with other parts of Jonglei (no data were available for other counties in Jonglei for this question). The discrepancy between the neighboring counties of Wau and Jur River (Figure 17) shows the diverse political affiliations in Western Bahr-el-Ghazal.

Fig. 18: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? (Juba, Rubkona, Malakal)

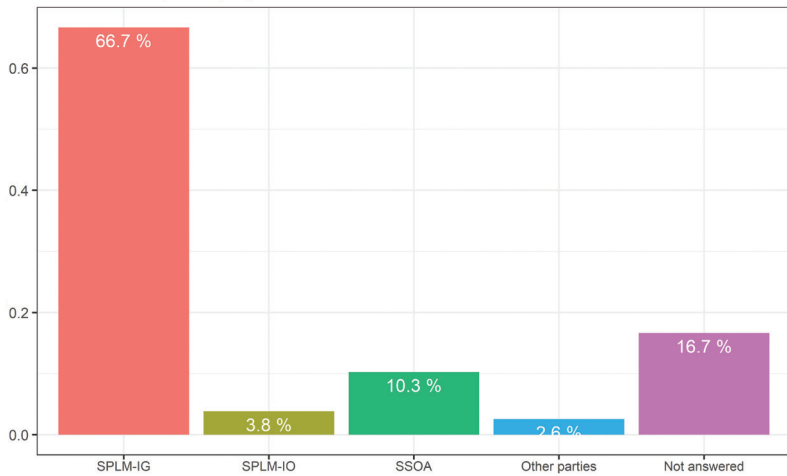
Juba



Rubkona



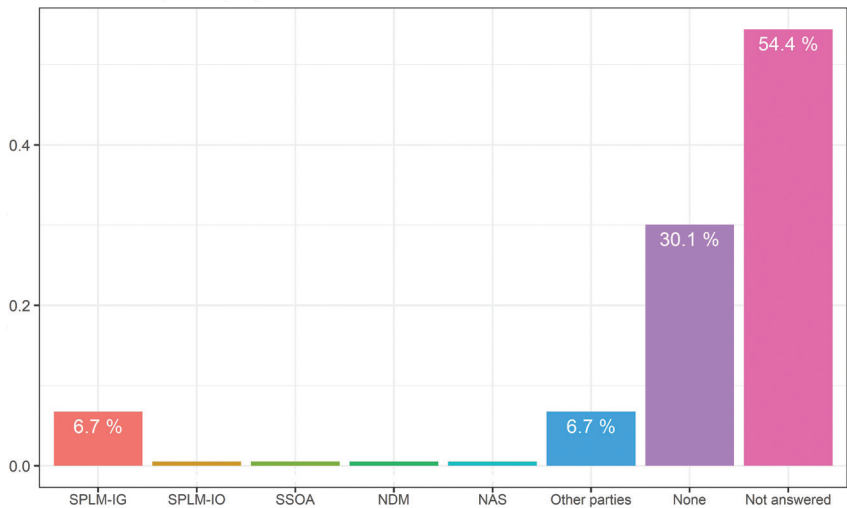
Malakal



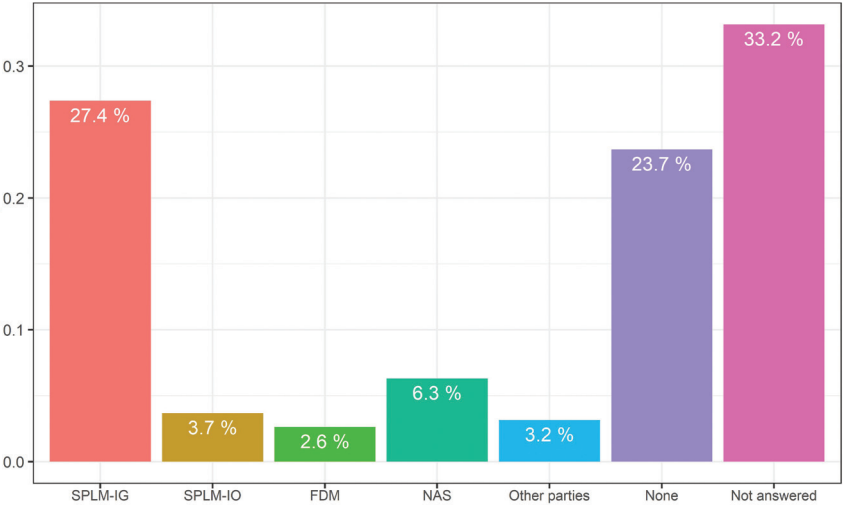
A number of counties show a closely contested political space. In addition to Rubkona and Malakal (Fig. 18) and Yei (Figure 19), which are currently experiencing a relatively high level of violence, this also applies to Wau (Figure 17) and the capital, Juba (Fig. 18). Overall, the political landscape in Juba appears to be more diverse than in most other parts of the country, with a higher popularity of political factions that are not very popular elsewhere. SPLM-IO's constituency in Juba relies heavily on the IDP camps, where 39.5 percent of respondents saw them as their preferred choice (compared to 14.4% for the SPLM-IG).

Figure 19: Which political party has the best vision for South Sudan? (Yambio, Yei)

Yambio



Yei



Of specific interest is the political situation in the Equatorias, which differs significantly from the rest of the country. Yambio County is a substantial outlier (Figure 19), where 84.9 percent of respondents either did not answer the question about which party has the most compelling political vision or said that no party had one. These results suggest a large political vacuum not only in this county but in the Equatorias more generally. In Yei County, as well, respondents answering either 'none' or 'no response' were by far the most substantial contingent (56.9%). Yei's political landscape is also different from other locations insofar as the National Salvation Front (NAS) led by Thomas Cirillo can rely on a healthy following (6.3%) there.

Combining overall numbers with results at the county level and accepting that the popularity of a party's political vision can act as a credible proxy for election preferences, the data offers a reliable argument for why the signatories to the R-ARCSS unanimously agreed to prolong the transitional period and postpone elections. Signatories to the R-ARCSS have little to win and a lot to lose from elections. For the SPLM-IG, a victory at the presidential and, depending on the type of election process adopted, the parliamentary level was very likely. However, they would have risked losing control of a considerable number of states and counties, which would have put them in a less advantageous position than that provided for by the power-sharing arrangement of the R-ARCSS.

The exact opposite is true for the political opposition. While they would not have been able to mount a credible challenge at the national level, they would have had a chance to convincingly win at the state and county levels, particularly in the Equatorias, parts of Jonglei, Greater Upper Nile and parts of Bahr-el-Ghazal. However, these wins surely would not have come easily, as there would have been a high chance of triggering violent conflicts. Combined with the likely loss of most if not all important positions at the national level, this explains the interest of the political opposition in postponing national elections.

Conclusions

The survey results suggest that national elections in South Sudan are an ambivalent affair. It is unlikely that they would result in a significant change of the political dispensation at the national level. The combination of a preference for bloc voting with the high popularity of the SPLM-IG suggests that the incumbent political leadership would likely win at the national level. The idea of facilitating political change through elections is not supported by empirical data.

Instead, elections would probably deepen political polarisation, especially through any outcomes at state and county-level that run against the interests of the SPLM-IG. These results would likely further political fragmentation, undermine political control at the centre, and carry a high risk of political violence, which the vast majority of respondents to this survey expect. However, these assumptions very much depend on decisions that are taken at the constitutional level, especially with respect to the preference given to 'first-past-the-post' systems versus power-sharing formulas and the final role of parliament in legislative control of the executive.

These results affirm the general reluctance towards conducting elections in a highly polarised and fragile environment without an established tradition of competition among political parties and ideas, which is an essential precondition for democratic elections. Perhaps more importantly, South Sudanese overwhelmingly want to vote, and they want to vote sooner rather than later. This discrepancy gives rise to a huge trade-off. Since South Sudanese clearly want to hold national elections, the attached risks – including pre- and post-election violence, political polarisation, increased fragmentation and a reconfiguration of political and military control patterns across the country – have to be clearly assessed and managed.

What appears to be missing is the development of the 'software' for a democratic election process. Voting as an individual right of free choice has only limited value if credible political alternatives to ruling elites are either not available or not able to reach the electorate. In parts of the country, political control patterns are strong. In other parts, particularly in the Equatorias, political alternatives are simply missing. While the criteria for elections in R-ARCSS and the recently agreed transitional roadmap are without doubt important, they are not sufficient to enable a credible election process. Therefore, especially for international supporters of South Sudan's transitional process, providing the conditions for truly non-violent political competition remains the most critical task.

References

- 1 A convenience sample of eleven counties was selected to represent the principal regions and conflict theatres in South Sudan. The research team used an approximately self-weighting stratified random sampling approach to select households, and then individuals within households. This method centred on a randomization strategy implemented using ArcGIS and the GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01.01 dataset. For each work day, enumerators began at randomly-drawn map coordinates and followed a random walk guided by smartphone apps. Enumerators recorded responses using KoboToolbox smartphone software. Reference: Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University and Novel-T. 2021. GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01. Palisades, NY: Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID3). <https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-khpa-pq09>.
- 2 The study drew from the Everyday Peace Indicator (EPI) methodology to develop measures of everyday safety through interviews and focus groups across five of the survey locations in January and February 2020. This produced five questions which were asked in each survey. The questions were then translated into an aggregate index of daily safety. Reference: Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, 'Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators,' *International Studies Review* (2017).

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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