



SOUTH SUDAN



Perceptions of Peace in Lakes State

Findings from the South Sudan Public
Perceptions of Peace Survey

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Acronyms

CIESIN	Center for International Earth Science Information Network
EPI	Everyday Peace Indicator
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
GRID3	Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development
PeaceRep	Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
R-TGONU	Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity
SPLM-IG	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Government
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

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Summary

- ▶ For many years, Lakes State has been notorious for high levels of intercommunal conflict among the various clans and subclans of the Agar section of Dinka. The main drivers of conflict in the state are internal and revolve around cattle-raiding, land disputes, revenge killings, a proliferation of small arms, and limited economic opportunities, particularly for young men.
- ▶ Shortly after being appointed in June 2021, the incoming governor, Rin Tueny, initiated a tough security response involving a combination of lethal force against perpetrators of intercommunal violence, extrajudicial detentions and executions, judicial responses through a network of 'special courts', and close collaboration with chiefs, particularly in information sharing. By all accounts, the security measures have succeeded in reducing intercommunal violence in the state, even though Rumbek North and Cueibet Counties remain unstable.
- ▶ Survey data from Rumbek Centre and Yirol West Counties on overall levels of safety indicate an overwhelming consensus that the security situation has improved in recent years, with 95 percent of respondents in Rumbek Centre and Yirol West saying that they felt 'very safe' in 2023 and no respondents reporting that they felt 'unsafe'. Views among respondents in Lakes on whether South Sudan is at peace or not are also far above the national average.
- ▶ Governor Rin Tueny's heavy-handed security response enjoys considerable popularity in Lakes State. However, survey data suggests that the support diverges considerably along gender lines. More than half (52%) of male survey respondents in Yirol West 'strongly disagreed' with the statement that, 'The government should respond firmly to insecurity even if that means violating human rights sometimes.' Among male youth respondents in Rumbek Centre, 41 percent either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the statement. Conversely, an overwhelming majority of female respondents in both locations agreed with the statement.

- ▶ At the heart of the policy debate on the security response in Lakes lie questions about possible trade-offs between effectiveness and accountability in governance. While the governor's initiative has been effective at restoring stability to the state in the short-term, it has done so at the expense of government accountability. Survey data shows how respondents in Lakes are grappling with these fundamental questions. When asked to prioritise among different governance aspects, respondents in Rumbek Centre emphasised the government's ability to respond to insecurity and respondents in Yirol emphasised the ability of citizens to hold government to account.
- ▶ Among the risks on the horizon for Lakes State and South Sudan more broadly are elections currently scheduled for the end of 2024. Survey data reflects fluctuating assessments of the risk of election-related violence among respondents in Lakes. Between 2022 and 2023, respondents in Rumbek Centre went from a majority viewing the risk as high to a majority viewing the risk as low, whereas the opposite trend was apparent in Yirol West.
- ▶ Currently, the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM-IG) dominates the political landscape. While the limited political competition may help to mitigate the risk of election-related violence, the many grievances from the protracted intercommunal conflicts in the state could provide fertile ground for disgruntled politicians seeking to attract armed youth to their cause.
- ▶ Policymakers should factor these considerations into their decision-making on elections and other transitional processes that are underway to consolidate the gains that have been made in restoring stability in places such as Lakes and pave the way for longer-term peace.

Introduction

Since the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018, the security situation has gradually improved in many parts of South Sudan. One apparent success story is Lakes State, where a controversial campaign by the state government under Governor Rin Tueny Mabor to promote 'security without compromise' has been effective in curbing rampant intercommunal conflict that has plagued the state for years. While the campaign is generally perceived to be popular among state residents, there are fundamental questions about its long-term sustainability and how it is perceived by those who are on the receiving end of the heavy-handed security response.

This policy brief delves into these questions based on a series of four iterations of the [South Sudan Public Perceptions of Peace Survey](#), conducted between 2021 and 2023 by Detcro and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep). The polls captured the views of 13,325 people from 15 counties across all 10 states and one special administrative area, encompassing diverse urban, rural and IDP camp environments.¹ Respondents were asked about their daily experiences of safety, drawing on indicators of everyday peace developed through qualitative research during the project's inception phase.² They also shared their views on a wide range of governance and security topics, including the prospect of national elections.

Intercommunal Conflict in Lakes

For many years, Lakes State has been notorious for high levels of intercommunal conflict among the various clans and subclans of the Agar section of Dinka. The main drivers of conflict in the state are internal and revolve around cattle-raiding, land disputes, revenge killings, a proliferation of small arms, and limited economic opportunities, particularly for young men. Survey data illustrated the scale of the problem. Ninety-nine percent of female respondents in Rumbek Centre said that cattle-raiding was a 'big' or 'very big' problem in their area (see Figure 1).³ Ninety-four percent of respondents in Rumbek Centre said that conflict in the area was not about politics at all, distinguishing it from the political violence that has badly impacted the country since December 2013 (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: How much of a problem is cattle-raiding in this area? By Gender [Rumbek, Yirol and All Lakes, 2022, n=483]

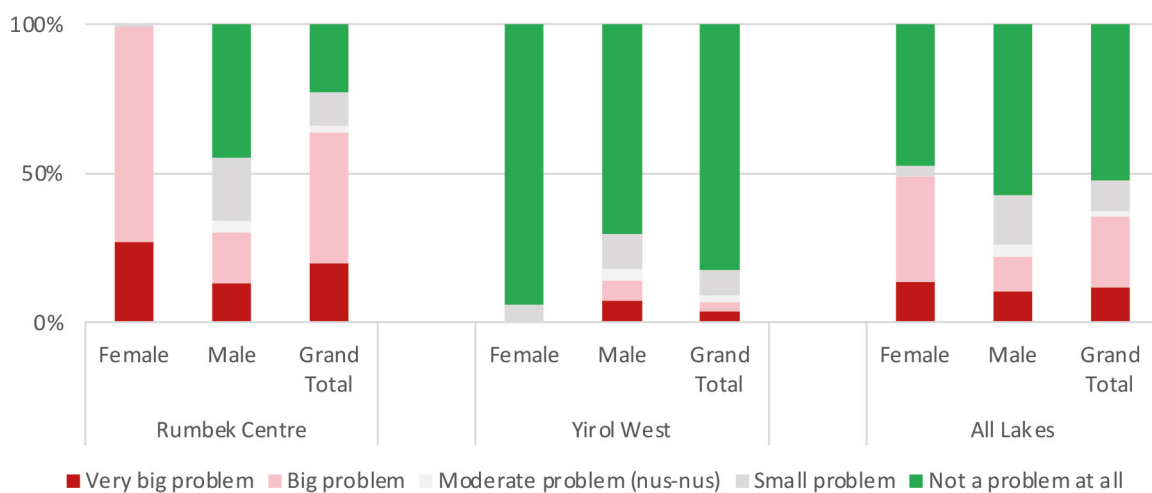
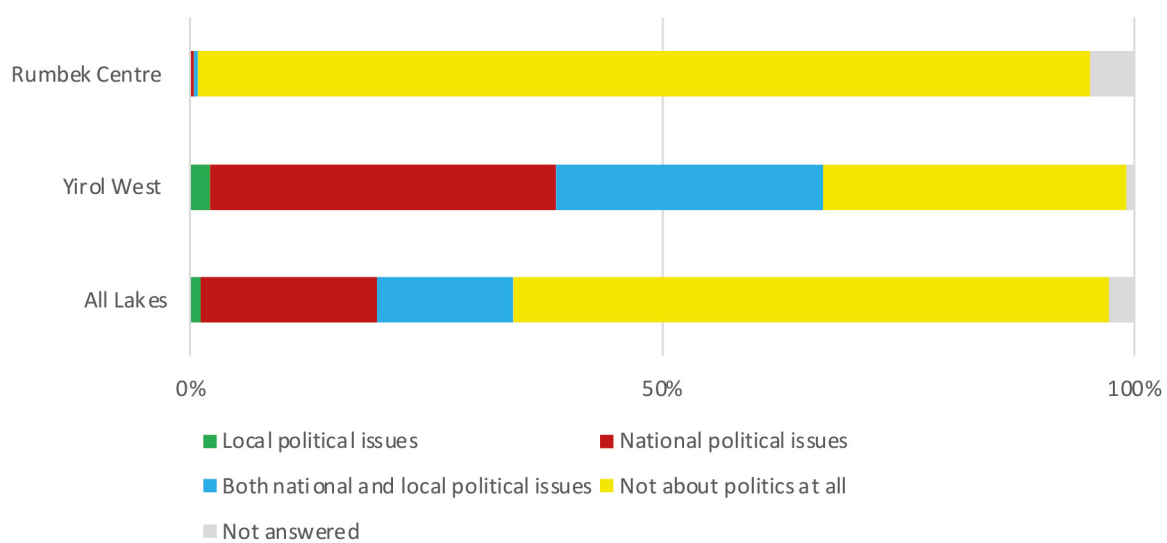


Figure 1: How much of a problem is cattle-raiding in this area? By Gender [Rumbek, Yirol and All Lakes, 2022, n=483]



‘Lakes First’ Agenda

Shortly after being appointed in June 2021, Governor Rin Tueny convened a conference in Juba for community leaders from Lakes to determine priorities for his administration. The conference resulted in 27 resolutions, including a mandate for a tough security response to intercommunal violence in the state. Dubbed the ‘Lakes First’ agenda after the slogan of the former American president, Donald Trump, the security measures involved a combination of lethal force against perpetrators of intercommunal violence, extrajudicial detentions and executions, judicial responses through a network of ‘special courts’ that were established by the judiciary, and closer collaboration with chiefs, particularly in sharing information about security incidents.⁴

By all accounts, the security measures succeeded in reigning in intercommunal violence in Lakes State. As Chany Ninrew observes in a January 2023 article for Eye Radio:

*After inheriting the leadership of a state in turmoil, Governor Rin Tueny Mabor restored law and order, reshaped Lakes to become one of the most peaceful states in the country, and earned national and regional recognition.*⁵

Survey data on overall levels of safety indicate an overwhelming consensus that the security situation has improved in recent years, with 95 percent of respondents in Rumbek Centre and Yirol West saying that they felt ‘very safe’ in 2023 and no respondents reporting that they felt ‘unsafe’ (Figure 3).⁶ When asked in which year has there been the most conflict among communities in the area, most respondents in Rumbek Center said 2017 and respondents in Yirol West were divided between 2019 and 2020 (see Figure 4). Very few respondents indicated 2021, the year that Governor Rin Tueny began implementing his security measures. Views among respondents in Lakes on whether South Sudan is at peace or not are also far above the national average.

Figure 3: Aggregate EPI By Location [2022-23]

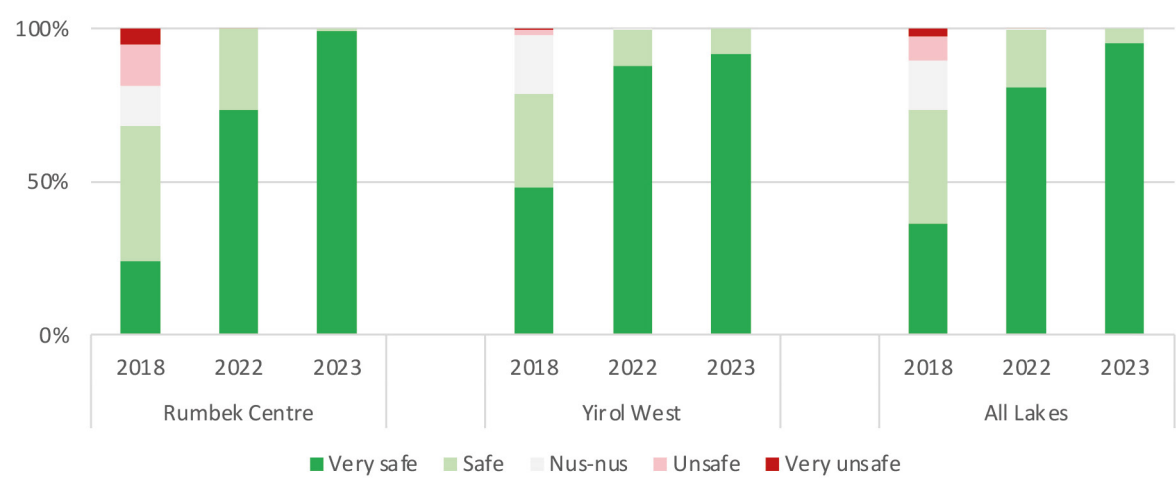


Figure 4: Since the war broke out in December 2013, in which year has there been the most amount of conflict between communities in this area? [2022, n=483]

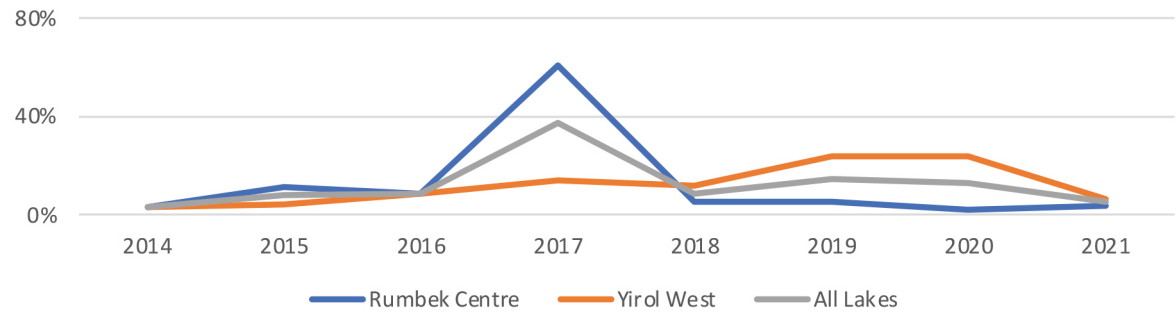
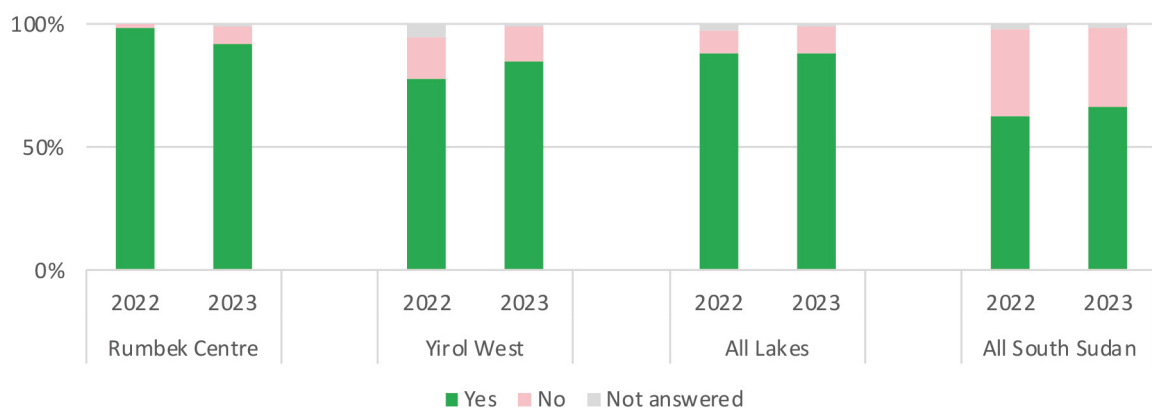


Figure 5: Is South Sudan currently at peace? [2022-23]



In delivering results where previous attempts have failed, Governor Rin Tueny's heavy-handed security response enjoys considerable popularity in Lakes State. However, survey data suggests that the support diverges considerably along gender lines. More than half (52%) of male survey respondents in Yirol West 'strongly disagreed' with the statement that, 'The government should respond firmly to insecurity even if that means violating human rights sometimes.' Among male youth respondents in Rumbek Centre, 41 percent either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the statement. Conversely, an overwhelming majority of female respondents in both locations agreed with the statement.

Figure 6: Agree/Disagree: 'The government should respond firmly to insecurity even if that means violating human rights sometimes.' By Age [Yirol West, 2022, n=242]

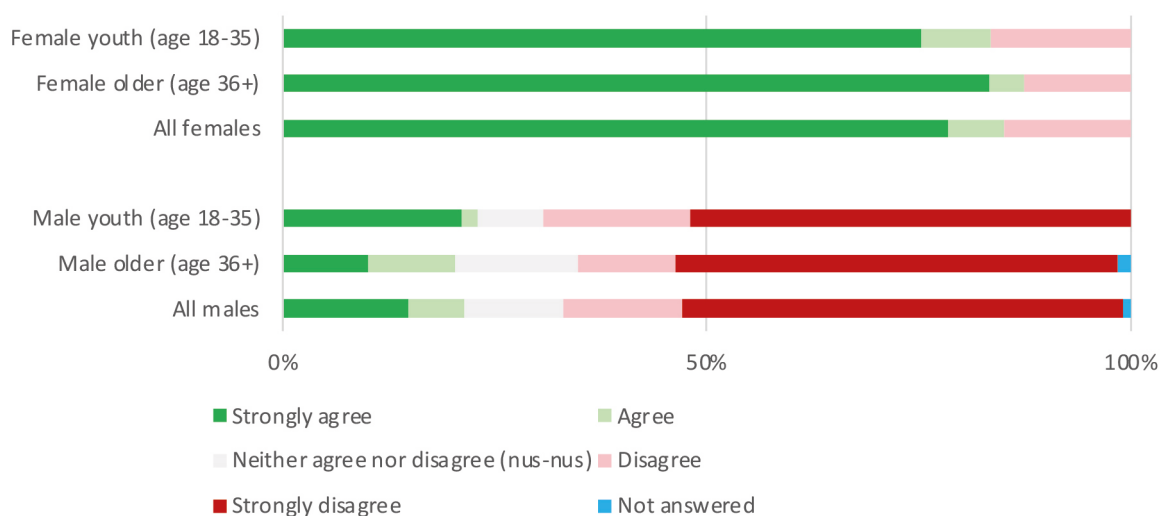
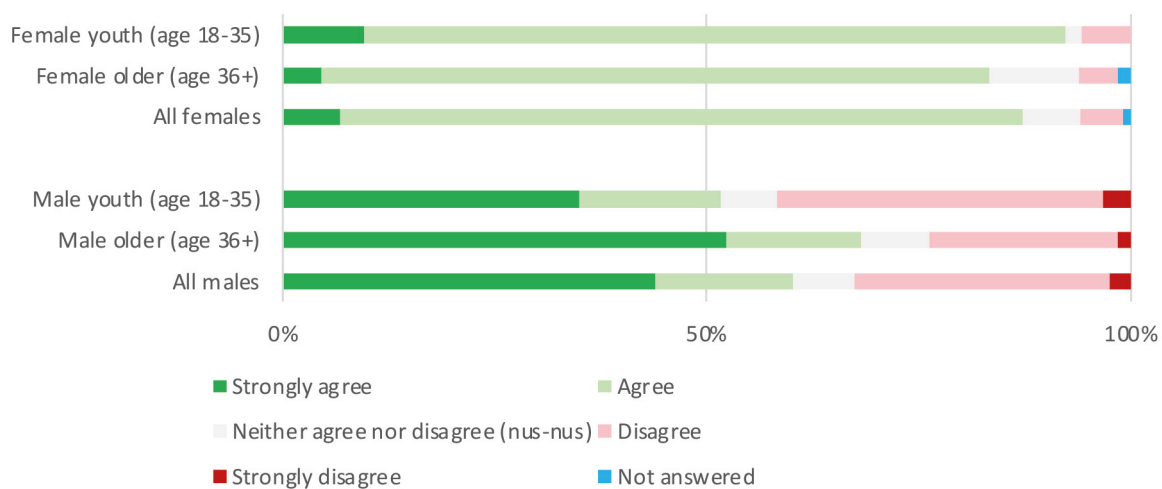


Figure 7: Agree/Disagree: 'The government should respond firmly to insecurity even if that means violating human rights sometimes.' By Age [Rumbek Centre, 2022, n=241]

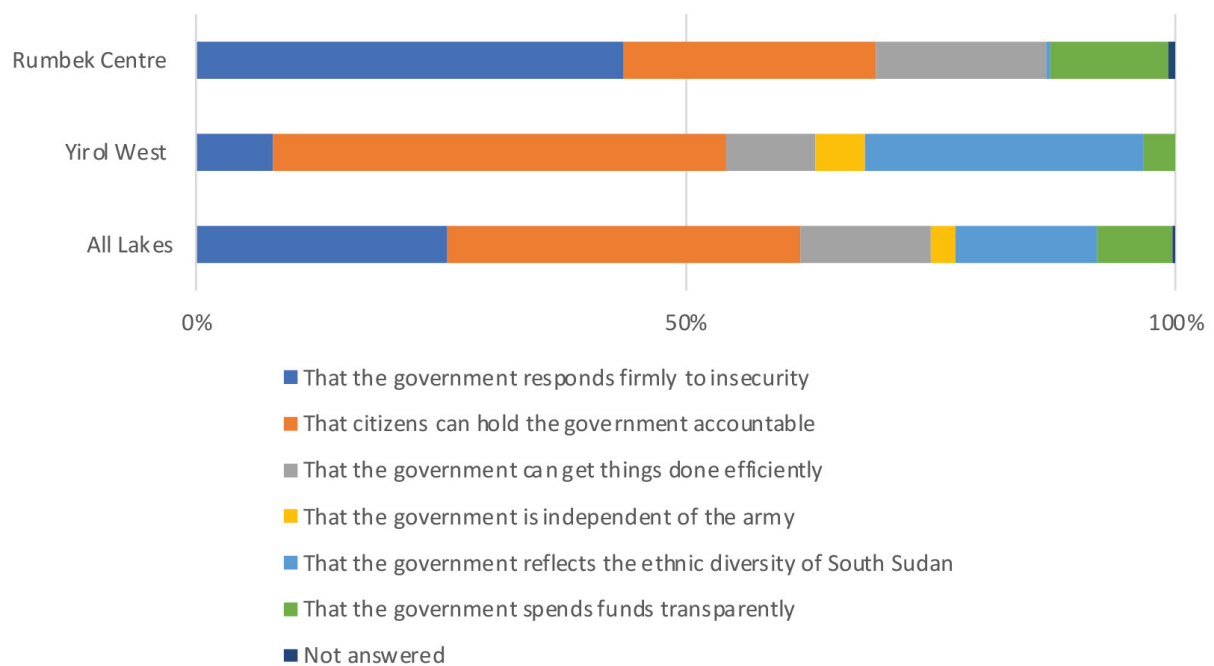


Certain aspects of the positionality of females in situations of intense intra-communal conflict may help to contextualise these findings and the apparent willingness of female respondents to accept security responses that might otherwise appear harsh and abusive. Women and girls typically marry into the communities of their husbands and thereby superimpose a set of kinship relations that cut across community lines. As such, they can be particularly sensitive to conflict dynamics that pit their in-laws against their birth families. Conversely, men, and particularly young men, are often on the receiving end of the harsh security measures, which might help to explain their opposition to such tactics.

Governance Preferences

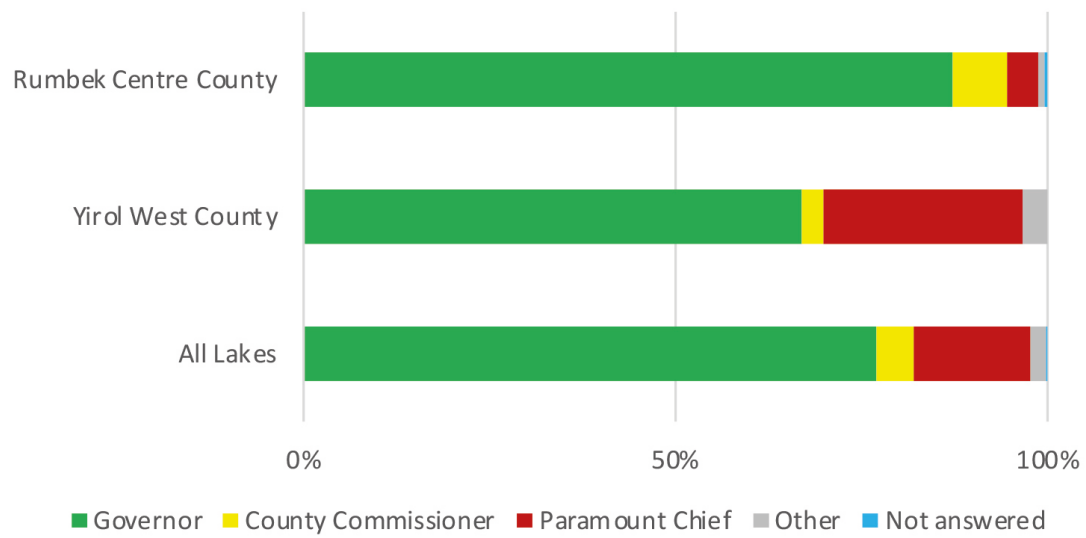
At the heart of the policy debate on the security response in Lakes lie questions about possible trade-offs between effectiveness and accountability in governance. While the governor's initiative has been effective at restoring stability to the state in the short-term, it has done so at the expense of government accountability. The sustainability of the intervention is also in question as it has become intertwined with the governor as a political figure. Efforts to institutionalise these responses into existing security and justice mechanisms have, so far, fallen short of expectations, and it is unlikely that the current fragile stability can be sustained should Rin Tueny leave office. Moreover, the longer-term drivers of violence, including easy access to small arms and limited economic opportunities for the youth, have not been addressed in a sustainable manner.

Survey data shows how respondents in Lakes are grappling with these fundamental questions. When asked to prioritise among different governance aspects, effective responses to insecurity and accountable governance emerge as priorities among respondents in Lakes, with respondents in Rumbek Centre emphasising the government's ability to respond to insecurity and respondents in Yirol emphasising the ability of citizens to hold government to account (Figure 8). These findings align with those of the preceding section that suggest the governor's approach is more popular in Rumbek, despite the fact that he himself comes from Yirol.

Figure 8: Which of the following things is most important to you? [2022]

Responses to a question about which actor is most influential in making decisions about the safety of your community point to the important role played by the Governor, but also the role of chiefs (see Figure 9). As indicated above, the willingness of chiefs to collaborate with government has been critical to the success of the security response. Nonetheless, the overwhelming reliance on a singular figure raises questions about the longer-term viability of the security response. Survey data suggests that many respondents in Lakes, and particularly in Rumbek Centre, do not feel adequately represented in either the state government or the security forces, which may also affect the extent to which they assume ownership of the security response.

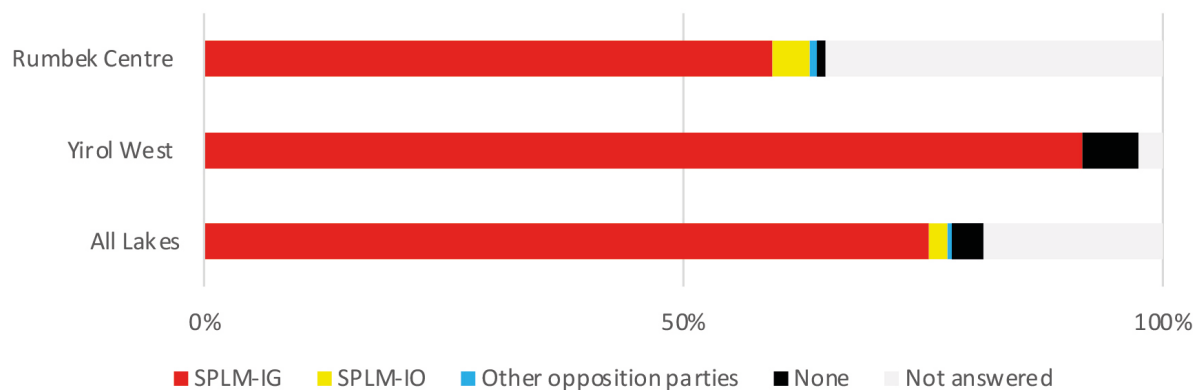
Figure 9: Who is most influential in making decisions about the safety of your community? [2023]



Concerns of Election-Related Violence

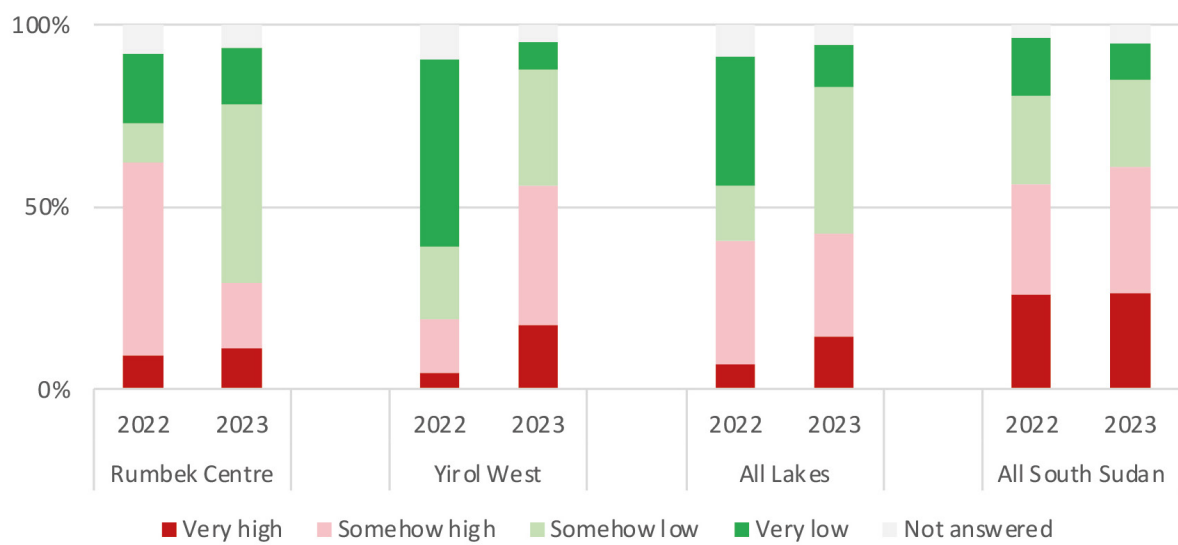
Among the risks on the horizon for Lakes State and South Sudan more broadly are elections currently scheduled for the end of 2024. Currently, the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM-IG) dominates the political landscape. Three-quarters (76%) of respondents in Lakes, including 92 percent of respondents in Yirol West, said that of the existing political parties, the SPLM-IG had the best vision for South Sudan (Figure 10). While the limited political competition may help to mitigate the risk of election-related violence, the many grievances from the protracted intercommunal conflicts in the state could provide fertile ground for disgruntled politicians seeking to attract armed youth to their cause.

Figure 10: Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan? [2023]



Survey data reflects fluctuating assessments of the risk of election-related violence among respondents in Lakes. Between 2022 and 2023, respondents in Rumbek Centre went from a majority viewing the risk as high to a majority viewing the risk as low, whereas the opposite trend was apparent in Yirol West. Indeed, political tensions rose in Yirol West towards the end of 2021, when the governor arrested and detained an SPLM-IO-appointed commissioner and forced him into retirement. The SPLM-IO did not escalate the issue and eventually appointed a replacement, but the episode highlights the potentially volatile nature of politics in a fragile conflict setting.

Figure 11: How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to elections? [2022-23]





Concluding Remarks

The 'Lakes First' initiative is not the first attempt in South Sudan to contain violence through forced disarmament and strict reprisals against perpetrators. Such approaches have historically shown limited success, as seen in the ongoing conflicts at various levels across the country. While the initiative in Lakes State may have garnered popular support, it will be difficult to sustain it over time without integrating conflict mitigation measures into existing security and justice mechanisms. The government must also make more of an effort to tackle the underlying social and economic drivers of conflict that incentivise violence. With upcoming elections scheduled for the end of 2024, the situation is likely to become more complex. Policymakers should carefully consider these factors while making decisions about elections and other transitional processes to build on the progress that has been made in restoring stability and lay the foundation for enduring peace.

Endnotes

¹ A convenience sample of 15 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 workday, enumerators began at randomly drawn map coordinates and followed a random walk guided by smartphone apps. Enumerators recorded responses using KoboToolbox smartphone software. See Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University and Novel-T. 2021, GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01, Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID3), available at <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 responses were then translated into an aggregate index of daily safety. See Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, *Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators*, International Studies Review (2017).

³ The survey data shows intercommunal conflict to be less of a problem in Yirol, which has historically been an island of stability in an otherwise conflict-prone state.

⁴ Jan Pospisil, *An Iron Fist in Lakes State: law, order, and Volatility on the Margins*, Small Arms Survey (SAS) (Jul. 2023), available at https://smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Situation_Update_An_Iron_Fist_in_Lakes_State_Final.pdf.

⁵ Chany Ninrew, *How Rin Tueny transformed Lakes into a peaceful state*, Eye Radio (30 Jan. 2023), available at <https://www.eyeradio.org/how-rin-tueny-transformed-lakes-into-a-peaceful-state/>.

⁶ Data was collected in Rumbek during waves 2-4 of the opinion poll, all of which were under Rin Tueny's governorship. Respondents were asked to recall how they felt at the signing of the R-ARCSS in September 2018, and the corresponding aggregate EPI scores have been included in the figure.

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