



Perceptions of National Elections in South Sudan

Findings from the 2023 Public Perceptions of Peace Survey

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Contents

Acronyms	01
List of Figures	02
Summary	03
Introduction	05
Perceptions of Elections	06
Risks and Preconditions	09
Party Popularity	15
Concluding Remarks	18

Acronyms

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
EPI	Everyday Peace Indicator
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
GRID3	Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority for Development
NAS	National Salvation Front
NCRC	National Constitutional Review Commission
NEC	National Election Commission
PeaceRep	Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
PoC	Protection of Civilian
PPC	Political Parties Council
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
R-TGONU	Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-IG	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Government
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

List of Figures

- Figure 1: 'When should elections happen?' (2003, n = 4,246)
- Figure 2: When should elections happen? By Environment (2023, n = 4,482)
- Figure 3: 'How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to the elections?'
By Year (2021-23, n = 13,317)
- Figure 4: 'How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to the elections?'
By Location (2023, n = 4,482)
- Figure 5: 'How safe do you feel speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues?'
By Region (2023, n = 4,482)
- Figure 6: Is a census necessary for conducting fair and credible elections?
By Displacement status (2023, n = 4,482)
- Figure 7: Do you think the enactment of a permanent constitution should be done by
the transitional government or by a new, elected government?
(2023, n = 4,482)
- Figure 8: Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan?
(2023)
- Figure 9: 'Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan?'
By Environment (2023, n = 4,482)

Summary

- ▶ Despite some positive steps like the passing of the National Election Amendment Act (2023) and the formation of key electoral bodies, preparations for elections are lagging. This has given rise to concerns about whether the elections can be held on time due to logistical and funding constraints. The political impasse among the parties over the timing of elections further complicates the issue.
- ▶ Public opinion, captured through the Public Perceptions of Peace survey, reveals a strong preference for holding elections in December 2024. A majority of respondents across the surveyed counties support this timeline, despite recognizing the high risk of election violence. Notably, internally displaced persons (IDPs) show a particularly strong desire for timely elections, posing a tactical challenge for parties like Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO), which are inclined towards postponement.
- ▶ The primary concern regarding the elections is the risk of election violence, with 61 percent of respondents in 2023 viewing it as likely or highly likely, slightly less than those who saw it as likely in 2021. There are significant regional variations in these perceptions.
- ▶ The political environment also poses a risk, as only a third of respondents feel safe discussing politically sensitive issues publicly, indicating that civic and political space is not yet conducive for free and fair elections.
- ▶ Additionally, conducting a census and drafting a permanent constitution, as required by the R-ARCSS and roadmap agreement, appear unlikely due to time and resource constraints. However, there is flexibility among the populace regarding the timing of the constitution's enactment, with many seeing it as a task for the post-election government.
- ▶ The ruling faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) (referred to for the purposes of the survey as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Government or SPLM-IG) remains the preferred political party in the surveyed counties, but the SPLM-IO shows strength in specific regions. The public's political frustration is also evident, with a significant portion of respondents expressing disillusionment with all political parties. This diversity in political preferences indicates a potentially mixed outcome at state and county levels.

- ▶ As of this writing, the feasibility of conducting elections as planned is uncertain. The data highlights three key points: a strong public desire to vote, flexibility on some preconditions for credible elections, and the likelihood of the SPLM-IG's national dominance with varied outcomes at lower levels.
- ▶ These insights are crucial for national and international stakeholders, suggesting the need for putting considerable effort and creativity into meeting election preconditions and emphasizing the importance of supporting the elections as an expression of the South Sudanese will. The potential diversity in election results is also significant, in that it could enhance the legitimacy of the electoral process and help mitigate the risk of post-election violence.

Introduction

National elections are the planned endpoint of South Sudan's post-civil war transition. They were already foreseen in the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS)¹ and have been confirmed in the 2018 revitalization of this agreement (R-ARCSS).² By the end of the initial transitional period, it had become obvious that a number of key provisions for elections could not be implemented in the scheduled timeframe of 44 months, even after the extension of the pre-transition period that added another nine months to the timeframe. In August 2022, the R-ARCSS signatories, therefore, signed a roadmap agreement³ that extended the transitional phase by another 24 months and scheduled elections for December 2024.

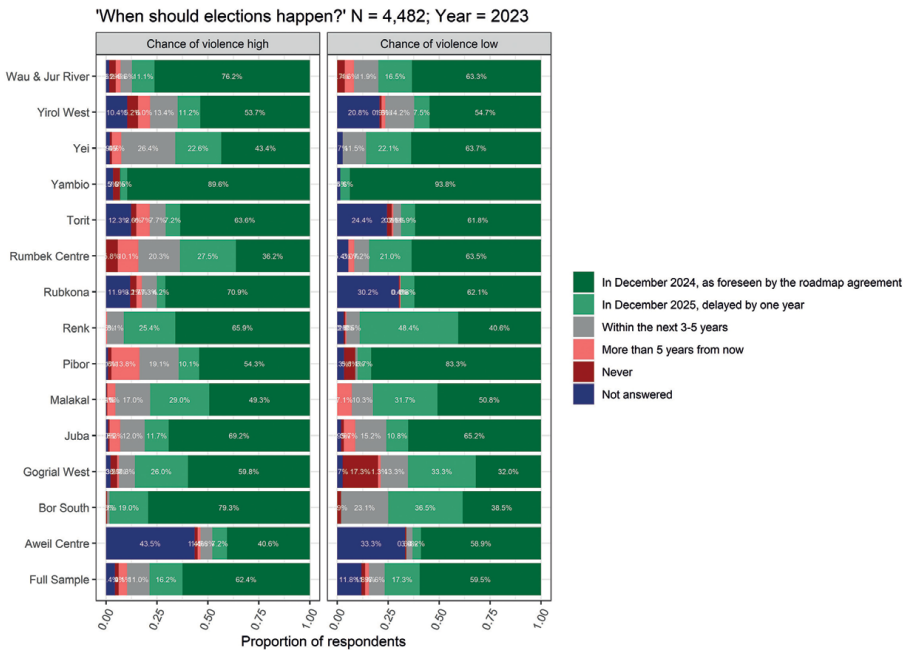
Since then, the parties to the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU) have failed to complete several steps initially perceived as essential prerequisites for elections, including a population census and the drafting of a permanent constitution. Completing these complex and expensive tasks seems unrealistic in the remaining months. Nonetheless, President Salva Kiir Mayardit has stated that elections should take place. The SPLM-IG has started with the nomination process for the presidency, endorsing the current president as their presidential candidate.⁴ Several other steps, such as the establishment of a reconfigured National Electoral Commission (NEC) and a Political Parties Council (PPC), have also been completed, though the institutions have not yet been provided with the resources they require to carry out their work.⁵

Against this background, this policy brief explores several issues regarding the planned elections, especially perceptions of the South Sudanese public on when the elections should take place, what are the necessary preconditions, what are the main risks and which parties have the best political visions for the country. The briefing draws on a series of four opinion polls 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 urban, rural and IDP camp environments.⁶ Respondents were asked questions about their daily experiences of safety based on indicators of everyday peace developed through qualitative research during the project's inception phase.⁷ They also shared their views on a wide range of governance and security topics.

Perceptions of Elections

The roadmap agreement foresees elections in December 2024. Despite some preliminary steps, such as the passing of the National Election Amendment Act and the formation of the reconstituted National Election Commission (NEC), the Political Parties Council (PPC) and the National Constitutional Review Commission (NCRC), preparations are behind schedule. Indeed, the parties have informally discussed another postponement of six months though no commitments have been made in this regard.⁸ Logistical challenges, mainly due to a lack of funding, are the main factor causing delays in the process.

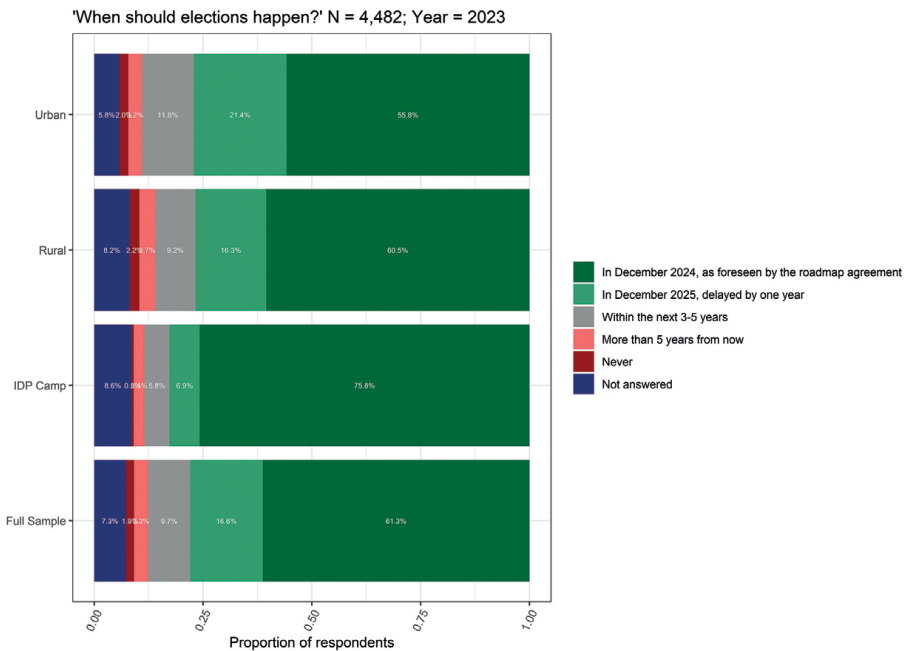
Figure 1: 'When should elections happen?' (2023, n = 4,246)



In the Public Perceptions of Peace survey, respondents were asked when elections should happen. When data collection took place in April 2023, the above-mentioned steps had not yet been completed, and respondents could not see any tangible progress apart from the roadmap agreement. Nevertheless, as Figure 1 shows, respondents overwhelmingly wanted to vote in December 2024, as foreseen by the roadmap. Some respondents (17%) said they would accept a delay of one year, but December 2024 was favoured by a majority in all surveyed counties. Three counties (Aweil Centre, Rubkona, and Yirol West) show a significant number of non-responses, which likely points towards a perceived risk in sharing views on a contentious topic like elections and raises questions as to whether there is sufficient civic and political space to conduct elections in the current environment.

Importantly, the figures also clearly show that the perceived risk of election violence does not undermine people's willingness to vote. In some counties (for instance, Gogrial West, Jur River and Renk), the demand of holding elections on time is even stronger among those who see the risk of election violence as high.

Figure 1: 'When should elections happen?' (2023, n = 4,246)



When disaggregating by survey environment (Figure 2), the data shows that residents in the IDP and Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites are particularly keen for elections to happen on time. Seventy-six percent of respondents in the camps want to see elections held on time, in contrast to about 60% in urban and rural areas. This could provide a tactical challenge for the SPLM-IO, which has publicly stated that the environment is not conducive for elections. Some of their core constituencies – many residents in the IDP camps lean towards the SPLM-IO (see Figure 9) – are obviously much more strongly in favour of on-time elections than the South Sudanese average.

Risks and Preconditions

The main risk in relation to the elections is election violence. The perceived likelihood is severe, with 61% of respondents in 2023 assessing election violence as 'likely' or 'highly likely' (see Figure 3). This number represents a slight improvement, however, compared to the 66% who saw it as likely in 2021. The regional results also differ significantly (Figure 4). Some counties, especially Pibor, Gogrial West and Bor South, report a very high perceived risk, while others, such as Rumbek Centre and Aweil, and, to an extent, Wau and Jur River, are far more optimistic. Nevertheless, there are a significant number of respondents who see election violence as likely in these locations as well.

Figure 3: 'How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to the elections?' By Year (2021-23, n = 13,317)

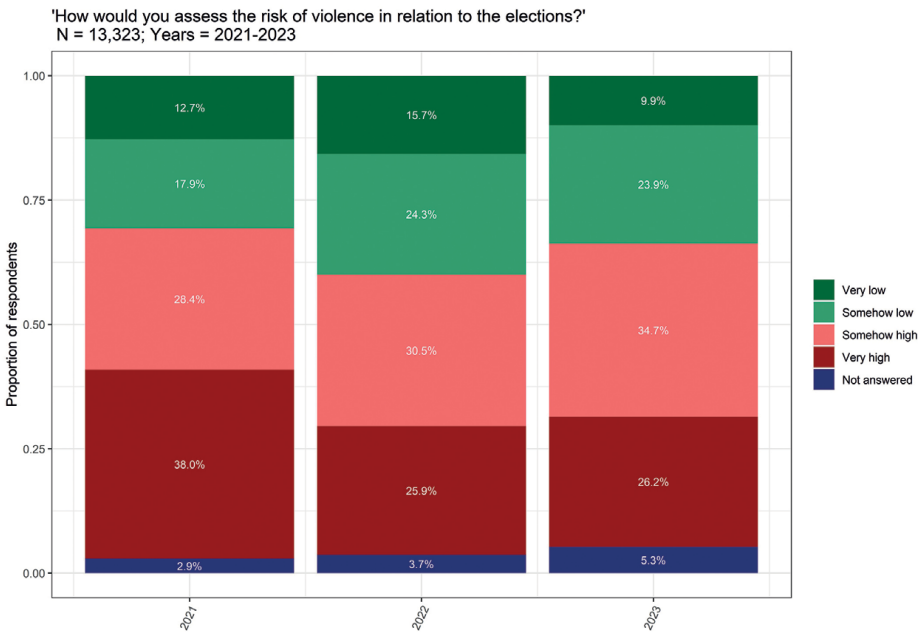
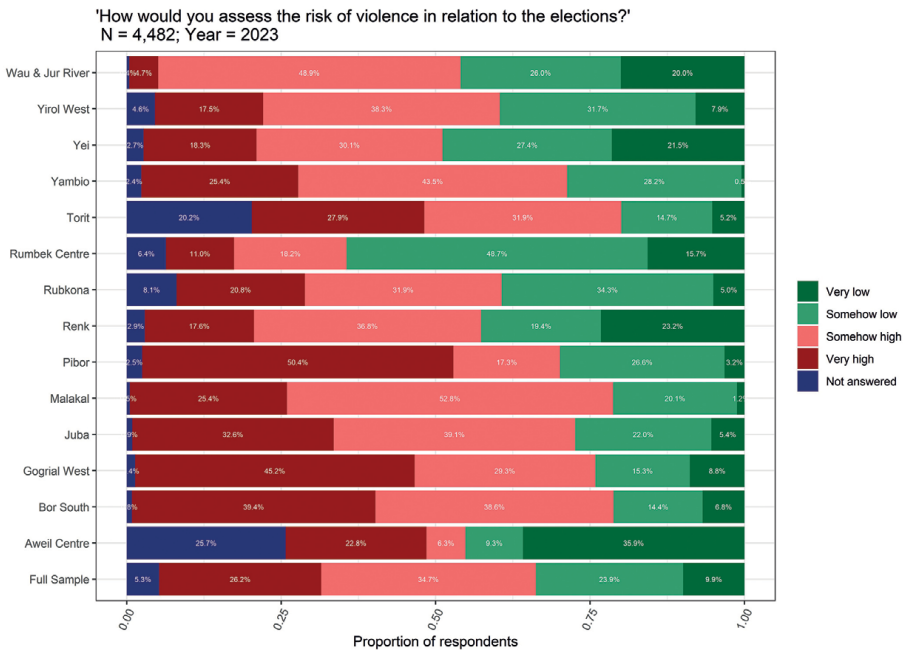


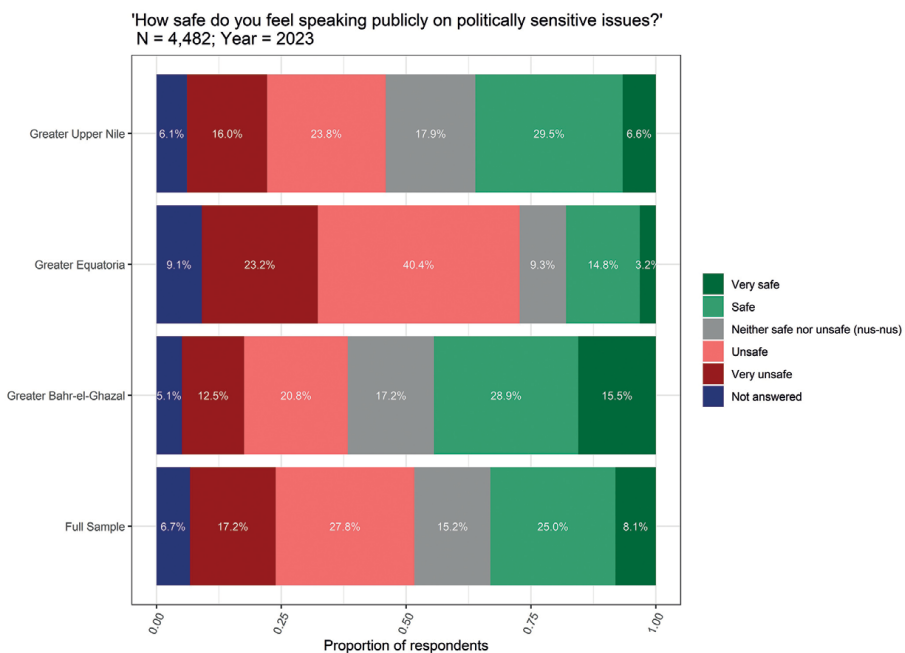
Figure 4: 'How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to the elections?' By Location (2023, n = 4,482)



While the perceptions of election violence point towards the necessity of effective security arrangements, Figure 5 shows that civic and political space is also of concern. Overall, only a third of respondents feel 'safe' or 'very safe' when speaking publicly about politically sensitive issues, and more than half of the respondents raised concerns, with 17% saying that they would feel 'very unsafe'.

There are striking regional differences that align with existing narratives about geographic variations in civic space. While people are generally more comfortable speaking their mind in Greater Bahr-el-Ghazal, which currently holds a large share of power at the centre of government, there are more reservations in Greater Upper Nile and, especially, in Greater Equatoria. While 45% of respondents in Greater Bahr-el-Ghazal felt comfortable speaking about politics publicly, only 18% of respondents in Greater Equatoria did. These figures suggest that the civic and political space is not yet conducive for holding free and fair elections, and that current political distrust towards the government translates into less confidence to publicly criticise and discuss politics.

Figure 5: 'How safe do you feel speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues?' By Region (2023, n = 4,482)



Besides functional security arrangements and a conducive political space, conducting a census and drafting a permanent constitution are two additional preconditions provided for by the R-ARCSS and the subsequent roadmap agreement. It currently appears that both processes are unlikely to be completed by December 2024 due to shortage of time and resources.

Indeed, conducting a census in a country as large and with as little transport infrastructure as South Sudan is a formidable task. It is, however, highly relevant for a first-past-the-post electoral system, where elected representatives are supposed to represent a more or less equal number of citizens in their respective constituencies. Survey respondents appear to have appreciated the importance of the census with close to 80% overall stating that they see it as a necessary precondition for credible elections. This also suggests a certain level of distrust in the population estimates that are currently available, which might be used for deciding on political constituencies in the absence of a census. In any case, since it is highly unlikely that a census will be conducted before elections, proactive political communication on how credible elections might work without one is of utmost importance.

Figure 6: Is a census necessary for conducting fair and credible elections? By Displacement status (2023, n = 4,482)

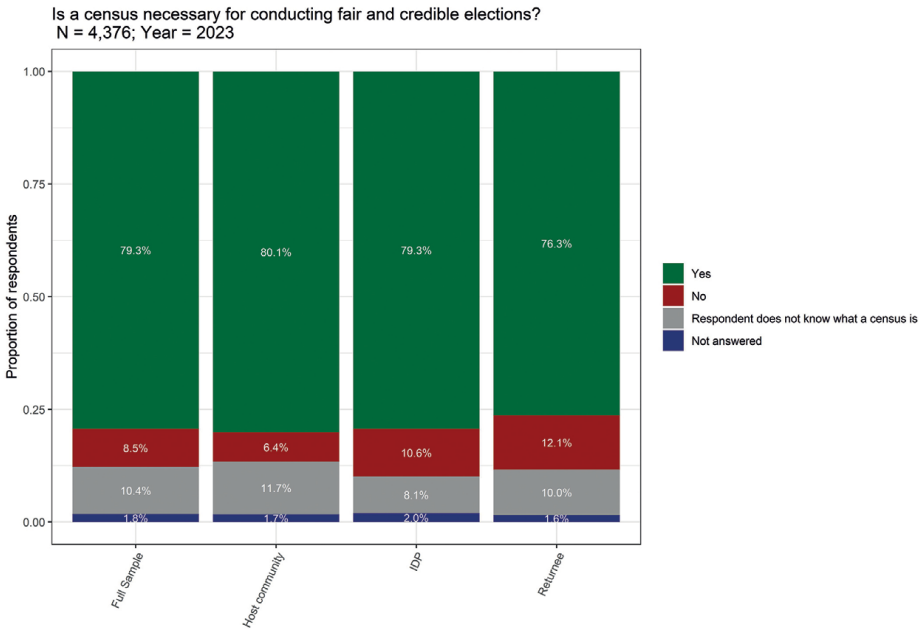
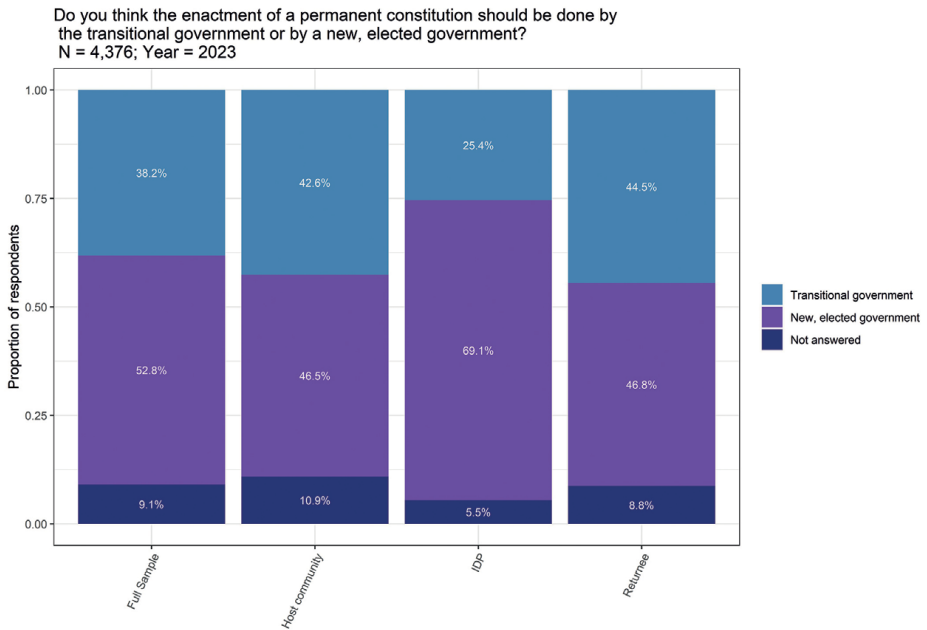


Figure 7: Do you think the enactment of a permanent constitution should be done by the transitional government or by a new, elected government? (2023, n = 4,482)



Respondents are more flexible regarding the enactment of a permanent constitution (see Figure 7). Despite claims by the NCRC that elections cannot be credibly held without a permanent constitution,⁹ a majority of respondents (52%) see this as a task for a new, elected government instead of for the transitional government currently in place. This stance has its logic – there is a transitional constitution in place that can provide the necessary legal backdrop for elections with some necessary amendments. It may also be challenging to recruit representative committees to support the constitutional drafting process in the current power-sharing environment.

Party Popularity

Projections about the political composition of the elected government can help policymakers to envisage likely scenarios and enact safeguards ahead of time that help to limit the potential for violence. The Public Perceptions of Peace survey did not poll voting behaviour for presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections, but used the question 'which political party has the best vision for South Sudan' as a proxy to predict voting behaviour. The results differ only marginally between the third and the fourth survey wave (conducted in 2022 and 2023 respectively), which points towards the reliability of the outcomes.

Figure 8: Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan? (2023)

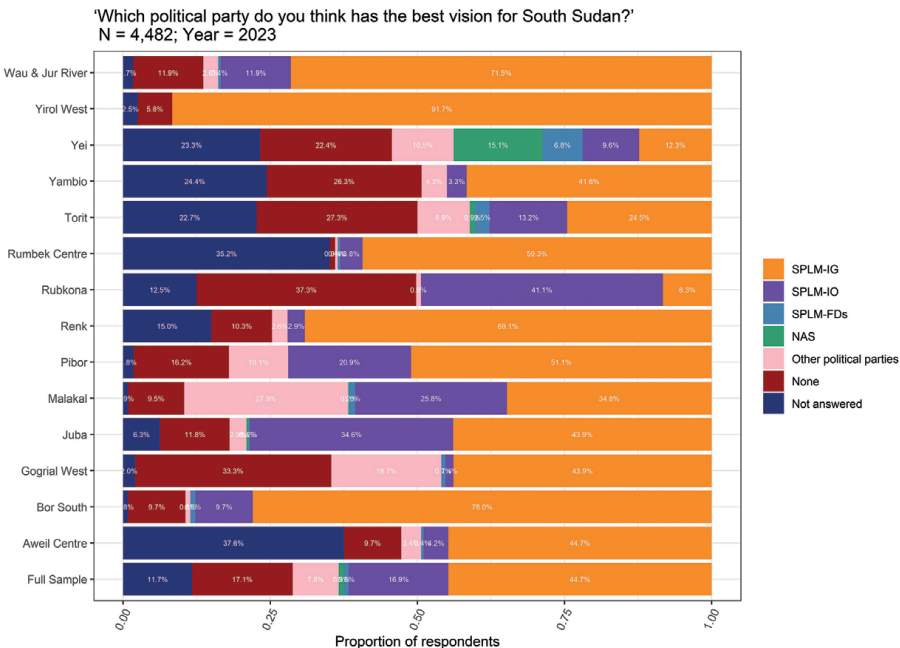
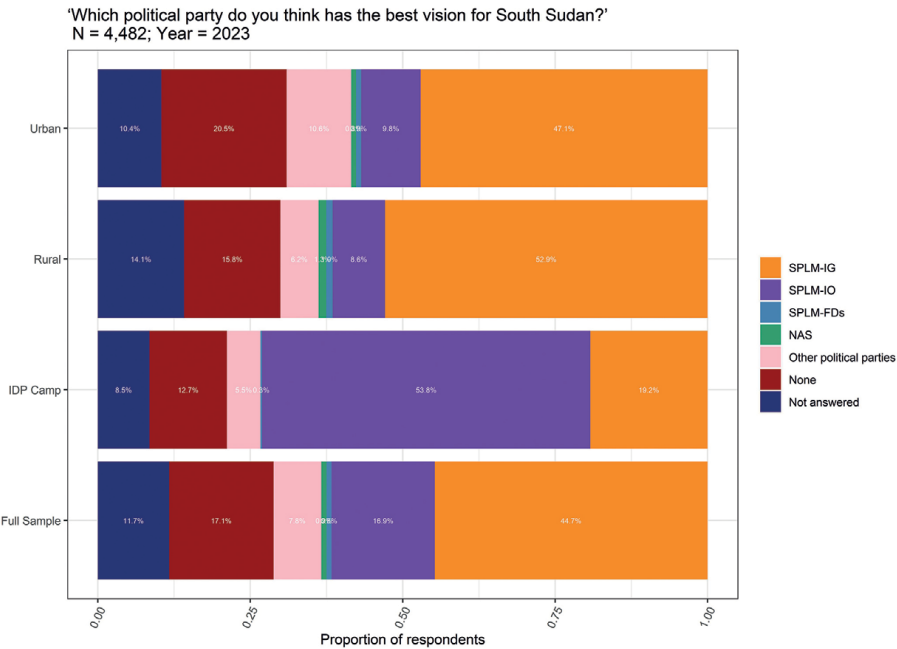


Figure 8 shows the results disaggregated by county. In the surveyed counties, the SPLM-IG remains the dominant political force, with 45% of respondents saying that it has the best vision for the country. The only other party that would make the four percent national threshold for the proportional representation seats in the national parliament is the SPLM-IO. However, with the support of just 17% of respondents, the SPLM-IO is significantly weaker and will, in all likelihood, struggle to challenge the SPLM-IG nationally. The picture at the state and regional levels is more mixed. In Rubkona (Unity State), for example, the SPLM-IO has a clear majority, but in Greater Bahr El-Ghazal, the SPLM-IG appears overwhelmingly dominant.

Results for the capital Juba are also highly diverse, with the SPLM-IG only marginally in the lead. SPLM-IG is also weak in two other surveyed counties in Equatoria, namely Torit and Yei. Yei shows a particularly interesting result, with 15% of respondents openly supporting the hold-out group National Salvation Front (NAS), which is, in absence of a signed peace agreement, still a rebel movement fighting for the overthrow of the current system.

Figure 9: 'Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan?' By Environment (2023, n = 4,482)



In general, the level of political frustration is high, with 17% of respondents saying that none of the existing parties has a good vision for South Sudan, and another 12% declining to answer the question. Figure 9 shows the disaggregated results by environment. Unsurprisingly, it shows the high popularity of the SPLM-IO in the IDP and PoC camps. In turn, SPLM-IO struggles among populations outside the camps, with support only reaching 10% in rural and urban settings.

Concluding Remarks

Whether elections will be the major cornerstone of South Sudan's transition into normal politics remains to be seen. With less than a year left until they are supposed to be held, the question of whether they can even be conducted as planned seems uncertain. Data from the Public Perceptions of Peace survey points toward three main takeaways: First, people want to vote, notwithstanding the imminent risk of election-related violence. Second, people are flexible with some of the preconditions foreseen by R-ARCSS and the roadmap agreement, even though it will require thorough and tangible political communication for the elections to be seen as credible in their absence. Third, the elections are likely to confirm the SPLM-IG as the dominant party at the national level, but to produce much more mixed results at state and county level.

These insights hold some important lessons for national and international stakeholders. First, elections will not necessarily result in a credible government and in an acceleration of the transitional process. Elections are, however, the clear will of an overwhelming majority of South Sudanese and, as such, worthy of international support. Second, some creativity is required in determining preconditions for elections. Globally, not a single post-peace agreement transitional process went according to plan and the R-ARCSS is no exception. The R-TGONU and the international guarantors should jointly decide on a path forward and come up with a clear decision on which of the outstanding tasks are indispensable and which tasks can be postponed until after the elections.

Finally, as an important point for national stakeholders to support the legitimacy of the elected government and to prevent post-election violence, election results that seem likely from the sample surveyed for this briefing favour different political stakeholders in different settings. Preventing political stakeholders from losing out completely is a tangible strategy for enhancing the legitimacy of an electoral process. Hence, these first predictions are encouraging and should be a strong incentive to prevent rigging and guaranteeing a free and fair election process.

Endnotes

¹ Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) (2015), available at: <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/1357>.

² IGAD, Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) (2018), available at: <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2112>.

³ Government of the Republic of South Sudan, Agreement on the Roadmap to a Peaceful and Democratic End of the Transitional Period of the R-ARCSS (2 Aug. 2022), available at: <https://dr.211check.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/EARCISS-ROADMAP.pdf>.

⁴ Wau: Kiir welcomes endorsement as SPLM candidate for 2024 polls, Radio Tamazuj (4 Jul. 2023), available at: <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/wau-kiir-welcomes-endorsement-as-splm-candidate-for-2024-polls>.

⁵ <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/kiir-reconstitutes-elections-commission-political-parties-council-constitutional-review-commission>.

⁶ 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>.

⁷ 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).

⁸ See *Election delay rumors in South Sudan swirl amid closed-door talks*, Sudans Post (19 Dec. 2023), available at: <https://www.sudanspost.com/election-delay-rumors-in-south-sudan-swirl-amid-closed-door-talks/>.

⁹ Moyo Jacob and Nyathong William, *Agreement doesn't allow holding of elections without 'permanent' constitution* – NCRC chief, Eye Radio (22 Dec. 2023), available at: <https://www.eyeradio.org/agreement-doesnt-allow-holding-of-elections-without-permanent-constitution-ncrc-chief/>.

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