

ELITE RECYCLEMENT OR GENERATIONAL CHANGE: SOUTH SUDAN'S CRITICAL JUNCTURE

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ON 16 APRIL 2025, DURING WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS OF THE SOUTH SUDANESE PEACE PROCESS, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG), Nicolas Haysom, gave one of his regular briefings to the UN Security Council. He said:

All our efforts are now focused on preventing a relapse into widespread conflict and refocusing attention on the implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement. During my last update, I warned of an emerging standoff between the two pre-eminent parties to the Agreement. This has now degenerated into direct military confrontation and escalated tensions across the country.¹

His remarks are exemplary in reflecting a broader international concern that South Sudan is once again teetering on the brink of a nationwide civil war, allegedly driven by escalating tensions between the government and opposition forces.² Over recent months, clashes in Upper Nile and parts of the Equatorias, renewed defections, and a deteriorating humanitarian situation have reinforced fears that the 2018 Revitalized Agreement is unravelling. International attention has thus coalesced around efforts to 'rescue' the

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1. United Nations Peacekeeping, 'Remarks by Mr Nicholas Haysom, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), to the Security Council' (United Nations, New York, 16 April 2025).

2. See, for instance, International Crisis Group, 'South Sudan on the Precipice of Renewed Full-blown War' (Alert/Africa, Brussels, 7 March 2025).

peace deal and preserve the fragile political arrangements underpinning the transitional government.

Nothing could be more wrong. Such warnings of escalation rest on fundamentally flawed assumptions. Rather than reflecting a breakdown of the peace process, the current tensions reveal a deeper structural shift. The key question is not how to save the Revitalized Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS).³ Instead, it is about understanding the broader political transition underway in South Sudan. What lies behind the renewed violence and political manoeuvring is not a collapse of political will, as habitually suggested, but rather a looming succession crisis driven by the arrival of a new political generation.⁴

This is not simply a matter of grooming a handpicked successor to President Salva Kiir. What is unfolding is a generational shift, one that challenges the wartime legacy of South Sudan's ruling elite. A new cohort, composed of individuals who did not participate in the liberation struggle, is beginning to assert itself. The composition of this group is diverse, ranging from entrenched business interests and second-generation military families to internationally educated technocrats and civil society actors. The question now facing South Sudan is whether this generational turnover will bring genuine political renewal or merely reinforce the entrenched logics of patronage and extraction that have long dominated its political arena.

Early indications point towards the latter. Nowhere is this trend more apparent than in the meteoric rise of Benjamin Bol Mel. He was recently elevated from his first political role, as Special Advisor for Special Projects to the President, to the rank of vice president responsible for the economic cluster.⁵ Bol Mel is widely regarded as one of the country's most powerful and corrupt businessmen. He is now positioning himself as a leading contender for the presidency.⁶ His ascent is emblematic of a broader pattern: the emergence of a new ruling class that seeks to inherit the political marketplace, as described by Alex de Waal, rather than dismantle it.⁷

This briefing examines the structural undercurrents behind South Sudan's current political moment. It argues that the peace process is not the main

3. Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), 12 September 2018, PA-X peace agreements database, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2112_5be57be98faf9.pdf> (26 April 2025).

4. See, for instance, UNMISS, *Peace Partners Urge South Sudan Government to Produce Plan and Budget to Complete Outstanding Tasks in Peace Deal Ahead of Elections* (UNMISS statement, Juba, 1 November 2024).

5. *Reuters*, 'South Sudan's Kiir replaces two vice-presidents, spy chief', 11 February 2025, <<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-sudans-kiir-replaces-two-vice-presidents-spy-chief-2025-02-11/>> (26 April 2025).

6. *Sanctions Watch*, 'Benjamin Bol Mel', <<https://sanctionswatch.cifar.eu/benjamin-bol-mel>> (26 April 2025).

7. Alex de Waal, *The real politics of the horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015).

stage on which the country's future will be decided. The real battle is over generational succession—and whether that succession will open space for reform or simply consolidate kleptocratic rule under new faces.

The manufactured crisis of the peace process: a marriage of convenience

The SRSBG's focus on rescuing the peace process is fundamentally misplaced. The crisis that Nicholas Haysom describes is not a genuine threat to South Sudan's political stability; rather, it is an integrative feature of the system itself. In reality, all major actors—the government, the opposition, and the international community—benefit from sustaining the illusion of a peace process constantly at risk, but never collapsing. The current tensions and warnings of breakdown are not signs of an impending relapse into war, they are part of a well-rehearsed survival strategy within South Sudan's political marketplace. Understanding this dynamic requires recognizing that the peace process lacks structural integrity.

The 2018 Revitalized Agreement (R-ARCSS) was, at its core, a surrender agreement for the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO).⁸ By the time of signing, the SPLM-IO was no longer in control of any major towns. It had lost the capacity to effectively wage national-level warfare. Against this background, Riek Machar was coerced into the agreement by regional powers—Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa, and his long-time ally, Sudan.⁹ Unlike the initial 2015 agreement (ARCSS), which collapsed amid active military contestation in a conflict that was obviously not 'ripe' for a settlement, the R-ARCSS reflected a new reality: the SPLM-IO's inability to challenge the government militarily.¹⁰ This underlying weakness has persisted, despite international actors repeatedly overlooking it.

As a result of their military defeat, the SPLM-IO is politically dependent. Their only access to state resources and political relevance comes through their participation in the transitional government. Without the R-ARCSS framework, the SPLM-IO would lose the little political space they still occupy, and many of their key members' access to scarce financial resources. Data from the South Sudan Public Perception of Peace Survey

8. Joshua Craze, 'Is this the end of the peace process?', 28 March 2025, *African Arguments*.

9. International Crisis Group, 'Salvaging South Sudan's fragile peace deal' (Africa Report no. 270, Brussels, 13 March 2019).

10. Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), 17 August 2015, PA-X peace agreements database, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag1357_562e4ff19c7b1.pdf> (26 April 2025); I. William Zartman, 'Ripeness: The hurting stalemate and beyond', in Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (eds), *International conflict resolution after the cold war* (National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 2000), pp. 225–250. On the inability of the SPLM-IO to challenge the government militarily, see, for instance, Joshua Craze, 'The periphery cannot hold: Upper Nile since the signing of the R-ARCSS' (HSBA report, Small Arms Survey, Geneva, November 2022).

underscore this reality: despite many caveats, countrywide support for the SPLM-IO hovers at around 20%, with its constituency mainly among the Nuer communities.¹¹ Even allowing for methodological limitations in terms of the countrywide representation of this study, it is evident that the SPLM-IO's position would deteriorate significantly if the peace deal were to collapse. Clinging to the agreement, for them, is thus a matter of political survival.

While recent analyses have highlighted the growing risks of political fragmentation and localized escalation, the broader framework of the peace agreement remains remarkably stable.¹² Rather than signalling imminent collapse, the current turbulence reflects a tactical recalibration among key actors competing for advantage within a durable, though dysfunctional, political marketplace.¹³ Violence may erupt, and local escalations occur, but no major political actor has a strategic interest in fundamentally dismantling the peace agreement. On the contrary, the R-ARCSS serves the essential interests of the government, the emerging new elites, and the opposition alike. Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil argue that it enshrines a formalized system for sharing spoils, while containing open warfare—a 'formalized political unsettlement'.¹⁴ Each faction has adapted to maximize its benefits within this framework.

First, for the main faction of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement, led by President Salva Kiir (commonly abbreviated as SPLM-IG, for SPLM 'in government'), the current arrangement offers a pathway to consolidate control over succession while maintaining the appearance of peace. For many protagonists of the old guard, it guarantees their individual pathways to clinging to power. This explains why controversial figures such as Michael Makuei and Martin Elia Lomuro have lobbied vigorously against holding elections, despite survey data suggesting the SPLM-IG would enjoy a comfortable electoral majority.¹⁵ Elections, even if theoretically advantageous, could force ageing political heavyweights into retirement, investigation, or even marginalization. For them, the strategy is clear: prolong the transitional

11. PeaceRep, 'Perceptions of peace in South Sudan: South Sudan survey data collection', pp. 20–21, <<https://peacerep.org/perceptions-peace-south-sudan/>> (26 April 2025).

12. Joshua Craze, 'On the brink: The politics of violence in South Sudan' (HSBA briefing paper, Small Arms Survey, Geneva, March 2025).

13. On the term 'turbulence', see Alex De Waal, 'When kleptocracy becomes insolvent: Brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan', *African Affairs* 113, 452 (2014), pp. 347–369.

14. Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil, 'Navigating inclusion in transitions from conflict: The formalised political unsettlement', *Journal of International Development* 29, 5 (2017), pp. 576–593.

15. Interviews with political observers and SPLM members, Juba, South Sudan, November 2024 to February 2025; David Deng, Jan Pospisil, Christopher Oringa, and Sophia Dawkins, 'Elections and civic space in South Sudan: Findings from the 2024 public perceptions of peace survey' (PeaceRep and FES policy brief, Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, Nairobi, 2024).

period under the cover of the peace process and manage a generational leadership succession through internal deals rather than a popular vote.¹⁶

Second, the opposition also needs the perpetuation of the transition. Without the protections afforded by the R-ARCSS, SPLM-IO leaders and smaller opposition groups would face political annihilation. Thus, even when clashes occur between opposition factions, none of the actors seriously advocates abandoning the peace framework. Their leverage, access to resources, and international legitimacy all depend on its survival.

The strategic goal of removing Riek Machar from his position as First Vice President has become increasingly important in recent months, utilizing his and his party's purported involvement in instigating the conflict in Nasir.¹⁷ While a formal investigation against Machar is ongoing and the specific allegations remain undisclosed, it appears that the White Army, a Nuer community militia particularly active in northern Jonglei and southern Upper Nile State, initiated its armed campaign against the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) in response to reports of an impending disarmament operation. Rumours suggest that Machar himself may have conveyed information about this alleged campaign to the White Army leadership.¹⁸

Whether such allegations are true or not, there is little doubt that the violent crisis in Nasir was used by parts of the government to create a political crisis.¹⁹ Under the terms of the R-ARCSS, should President Kiir become temporarily unable to govern, the First Vice President would take over executive powers. For the old guard surrounding Kiir, Machar thus represents a significant liability—both as a potential power rival and as a symbol of past betrayals. Replacing him with a more pliant figure would consolidate their grip on the transitional government and address a deeper fear: that a Nuer politician, perceived as potentially uncontrollable, could ascend to the highest office. This anxiety remains a powerful, if often unspoken, unifying factor among many Dinka communities across the country.²⁰

Despite this, large parts of the SPLM-IO continue to see their future tied to the transitional framework, with or without Machar at the helm. Even after his effective house arrest, there was no significant armed uprising

16. For a discussion on other factors working against elections, see Nicki Kindersley, 'Elections in South Sudan: Lessons from everyday democracy' (Report, Rift Valley Institute and Just Future, Juba, 2025).

17. *The EastAfrican*, 'South Sudan defends detention of Riek Machar allies', 6 March 2025, <<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/south-sudan-defends-detention-of-riek-machar-allies-4953256>> (26 April 2025).

18. Interviews with political observers, Juba, March 2025.

19. Jan Pospisil, 'Never Let a Good Crisis Go: On the Political Escalation in South Sudan', *PeaceRep blog post*, University of Edinburgh, 4 April 2025).

20. On the broader implications of ethnopolitics and its negative impact on social contracts, see Luka Biong Deng Kuol, 'When ethnic diversity becomes a curse in Africa: The tale of the two Sudans', *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, 21 (2019), pp. 15–35.

among the SPLA-IO forces. Instead, the SPLM-IO factions faced renewed attacks from the SSPDF in several parts of the country, aimed at further weakening and fragmenting their structures.²¹ Machar's political weakness has been brutally exposed, yet the government's strategy reveals that it still values the SPLM-IO's participation in the transitional arrangement. The active support for internal party factions seeking to sideline Machar illustrates that the SPLM-IG's goal is not to dismantle the SPLM-IO altogether, but rather to reshape it into a more compliant political actor within the managed framework of the peace process.²²

Finally, the international community is also deeply invested in sustaining the illusion of a peace process. Constant warnings of potential collapse serve to justify ongoing diplomatic engagement, humanitarian funding, and peace-keeping mandates. The idea that South Sudan is 'on the brink' creates a powerful moral and political argument for continued involvement, while obscuring the reality that the underlying political bargain remains stable.²³ The so-called Tumaini peace initiative, hosted in Nairobi, exemplifies this dynamic.²⁴

The process was framed as an opportunity to bring exiled opposition leaders—such as Paul Malong and Pagan Amum—back into the fold. It generated some excitement among international actors, with bilateral donors like Norway and the UK, as well as the UN peacekeeping mission, UNMISS, throwing political and symbolic support behind it. Yet, from the outset, Tumaini was detached from political realities in Juba.²⁵ The figures involved were spent forces, with no serious base inside South Sudan. Their demands only grew more unrealistic over time, and eventually, even SPLM-IG, which had initially played along for tactical reasons, withdrew from the process

21. See, for instance, Radio Tamazuj, 'Families flee fighting in Morobo villages', 23 April 2025, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/families-flee-fighting-in-morobo-villages>>; 'Western Equatoria: Senior SPLM-IO officials defect to Kiir', 3 April 2025, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/senior-splm-io-officials-defect-to-kiirs-party-in-western-equatoria>>; 'Lakes State shuts SPLM-IO office after arrests', 25 March 2025, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/lakes-state-shuts-splm-io-office-after-arrests>>; 'SPLM-IO MP condemns SSPDF attacks on Jur River County villages', 24 February 2025, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/splm-io-mp-condemns-sspdf-attacks-on-jur-river-county-villages>> (26 April 2025).

22. *Eye Radio*, 'SPLM-IO suspends Stephen Par, three others over alleged plot to replace Machar', 7 April 2025, <<https://www.eyeradio.org/splm-io-suspends-stephen-par-three-others-over-alleged-plot-to-replace-machar/>> (26 April 2025).

23. *UN News*, 'South Sudan on the brink as peace deal falters, UN warns', 16 April 2025, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1162321>> (25 April 2025).

24. Declaration of commitment to the Tumaini (hope) Initiative for the South Sudan peace process, 16 May 2024, PA-X peace agreements database, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/SS_240516_Tumaini_Initiative_Declaration_of_Commitment_to_the_Tumaini_hope_Initiative.pdf> (26 April 2025).

25. Ibrahim Magara and Jan Pospisil, 'Overloaded? Hope and scepticism around the Tumaini peace initiative for South Sudan', 27 May 2024, *African Arguments*, <<https://africanarguments.org/2024/05/overloaded-hope-and-scepticism-around-the-tumaini-peace-initiative-for-south-sudan/>> (26 April 2025).

altogether.²⁶ Tumaini was never a genuine peace effort. It was an expensive distraction that masked the far more consequential internal shifts happening within Juba's ruling elites.

Meanwhile, the main peace framework has remained remarkably durable. While local escalations have led to real suffering and casualties, they have not fundamentally threatened the core settlement. The R-ARCSS never aimed to resolve South Sudan's underlying conflicts. It merely formalized them—locking in existing power relations and relocating violence from the national to the subnational level. The 'peace' achieved is partial: a fragile form of conflict management in government-controlled areas, and continued instability in contested regions, particularly in Greater Upper Nile and parts of the Equatorias.

Why, then, the constant alarmist language about the peace process being at risk? Because the narrative serves every party involved: for the government, it allows problematic figures to rebrand themselves as peacemakers; for the opposition, it secures political relevance and access to international support; and for international actors, it reinforces their rationale for engagement. Ultimately, it is this very stability of managed dysfunction that allows the succession struggle to unfold behind the scenes, largely hidden beneath the noise of supposed peace process crises.²⁷

The looming question of succession

As the transitional government continues to drift, the real question that now preoccupies political actors in Juba is no longer peace implementation but presidential succession. The later years of President Kiir's rule have seen a systematic deinstitutionalization of the SPLM party structures. The factional splits along ethnopolitical lines that have always shaped South Sudanese politics, and the SPLM in particular, have significantly deepened.²⁸ The SPLM has been hollowed out. What once functioned, however imperfectly, as a party structure capable of scrutinizing and disciplining its leaders has become a closed circle, dominated by personal networks, familial ties, and patronage systems. In this, it mirrors other post-liberation regimes across Sub-Saharan Africa that have slid into neopatrimonial governance.²⁹

26. Radio Tamazuj, 'Kenya suspends Tumaini Initiative talks', 21 February 2025, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/kenya-suspends-tumaini-initiative-talks>> (26 April 2025).

27. This mechanism is also commonly misinterpreted academically, especially in research focusing on agreement implementation. See, for example, Madhav Joshi, 'Revitalizing towards peace or relapsing into chaos? Implementation of South Sudan's 2018 agreement and the upcoming elections' (Peace Accord Matrix policy report, Kroc Institute, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, 2024).

28. Øystein H. Rolandsen, *Guerrilla government: Political changes in the southern Sudan during the 1990s* (Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 2005).

29. It is important to note that neo-patrimonial governance is functional rather than dysfunctional, as shown by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa works: Disorder as political instrument* (James Currey, Oxford, 1999).

This institutional erosion is particularly dangerous when it comes to the question of succession. When John Garang died in 2005, the SPLM was still largely intact, and the memory of the liberation struggle provided a shared reference point. The SPLA command structure had the authority to manage the leadership transition, and it was under this political and military consensus that Salva Kiir was selected as Garang's successor.³⁰ That moment stands in stark contrast to the current situation.

Today, there is no clear process—and little trust—in managing a transition. A key warning sign emerged with the removal of long-serving Vice President James Wani Igga on 10 February 2025, paving the way for Benjamin Bol Mel. Wani Igga, part of the old guard and now in his mid-seventies, was formally reassigned as the SPLM secretary-general.³¹ But the move sparked resistance even within the party's top ranks. The sidelining of other influential party figures, such as Peter Lam Both, added to the perception that Kiir's circle was attempting to bypass internal party structures altogether. Even the normally loyal Wani Igga reportedly hesitated, and senior party grandees made clear to Kiir that while R-ARCSS gives him the power to reshuffle the executive and legislature, he cannot unilaterally restructure the SPLM itself.³²

This episode laid bare the fragility of Bol Mel's claim to succession. According to the R-ARCSS peace agreement, if the president resigns or dies, the party must nominate a successor within 48 hours. The likelihood that a figure as contested and widely resented as Bol Mel could secure such a nomination is slim. Known as a notorious kleptocrat with little genuine backing in the party base, his elevation would likely trigger major internal dissent.

Yet it is precisely this fragile legitimacy that has made Bol Mel accelerate his ambitions. Lacking organic support, he has already begun positioning himself as the inevitable successor. Rivals and potential threats are being removed, and perceived challengers from outside the SPLM-IG inner circle—such as Riek Machar—are being neutralized through targeted pressure. The recent move by the Minister of Peacebuilding, Stephen Par, to declare himself SPLM-IO leader during Machar's absence—without the backing of

30. Douglas Hamilton Johnson, *The root causes of Sudan's civil wars: Peace or truce* (James Currey, Woodbridge, 2011).

31. Eye Radio, 'President Kiir sacks vice presidents Igga, Abdelbagi in massive reshuffle', 10 February 2025, <<https://www.eyeradio.org/president-kiir-sacks-vice-presidents-igga-abdelbagi-in-massive-reshuffle/>> (26 April 2025).

32. *Sudan's Post*, 'Ex-VP Wani Igga refuses demotion after Kiir's party shake-up—officials', 11 February 2025, <<https://www.sudanpost.com/ex-vp-wani-igga-refuses-demotion-after-kiirs-party-shake-up-officials/>> (26 April 2025); Chuol Jany Bol in Radio Tamazuj, 'Opinion: Why Dr James Wani Igga became a war veteran with a dual role in the SPLM', 28 February 2025, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/opinion-why-dr-james-wani-igga-became-a-war-veteran-with-a-dual-role-in-the-splm>> (26 April 2025).

the IO's mainstream—is widely seen as an operation orchestrated by Bol Mel to split and weaken Machar's hold on the party.³³

This political offensive, however, could be misread. There is a common misconception that Kiir is grooming Bol Mel as his successor. In reality, Bol Mel's role is more functional than political. He has been brought in to stabilize a collapsing economy. He can do so largely by leveraging his personal wealth, accumulated through years of corrupt road construction deals. His rise is not backed by broad political support.³⁴ Bol Mel is not a consensus figure but a financial operator. He is trusted to hold together the economic machinery of patronage, not to lead the nation.

Despite repeated speculation about succession plans, there is little evidence that Kiir is actively preparing to step aside. If anything, he continues to present himself as the ruling party's most viable candidate for elections—should they happen in December 2026 or later. He has publicly declared his willingness to contest, and for good reason: elections, properly managed, would likely reinforce SPLM-IG dominance. For Kiir personally, they offer a path to renewed legitimacy without ceding power.

Still, the broader political environment is becoming increasingly unstable. Competition over appointments is growing fiercer, and governance has become erratic. The pie is shrinking, and everyone wants a slice. The once-celebrated ability of Kiir to balance rival factions and manage internal contradictions through controlled instability is fading. His system of divide-and-rule no longer works as smoothly as it once did.

Occasional moves still reveal a keen sense for *realpolitik*. The quiet removal of Akol Koor Kuc—once regarded as one of the most powerful men in the country, with deep roots in the security services and ambitions of his own—demonstrates that Kiir can still counteract perceived threats.³⁵ Akol, head of the Internal Security Bureau of the NSS and long seen as a potential presidential contender, was dismissed and placed under house arrest without significant resistance.³⁶ But such moves are increasingly rare, and the system as a whole is deteriorating.

Meanwhile, the country's economic collapse has accelerated political decay. Hundreds of leadership positions have been reshuffled in recent months, producing instability at every level of government. Yet this

33. Radio Tamazuj, 'Interview: Stephen Par's group meets Kiir', 16 April 2025, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/interview-stephen-pars-group-meets-kiir>> (26 April 2025).

34. Interviews with political observers and SPLM party members, Juba, February and March 2025.

35. The EastAfrican, 'South Sudan President Kiir dismisses intelligence chief Akol Koor Kuc', 3 October 2024, <<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/kiir-dismisses-long-serving-security-chief-4784638>> (26 April 2025).

36. Radio Tamazuj, 'Standoff with ex-spy chief resolved: Official', 22 November 2024, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/standoff-with-ex-spy-chief-resolved-official>> (26 April 2025).

breakdown is not primarily due to oil pipeline disruptions or external shocks. It is the result of years of systemic corruption.³⁷ With South Sudan's financial credibility shattered, international loans and credit lines have all but dried up. In response, the government has cycled through finance ministers and central bank governors in rapid succession—none of whom has been able to restore investor or donor confidence. Now, ironically, Bol Mel, one of the system's architects, is tasked with repairing the financial structures of a state brought to the brink by the very practices he helped entrench.³⁸

Recycling elites? South Sudan at a critical juncture

It would be a profound mistake to reduce South Sudan's looming leadership succession to a matter of personalities. The stakes are much broader. Without a doubt, the era of the veterans of the Sudanese civil war is drawing to a close. A leadership circle dominated by men now in their seventies is nearing its natural end. As this generation fades, South Sudan faces what Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson would call a 'critical juncture': a moment where the trajectory of political development could fundamentally change—or merely reinforce old patterns.³⁹

The key question is not when the succession will happen, but what kind of new generation will take over. It would be dangerously naïve and ahistorical to assume that a generational shift alone will produce better governance. There are multiple recent examples in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond where leadership transitions merely entrenched elite predation. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the transition from Laurent and Joseph Kabila (father and son) produced not renewal, but a deepening of opaque resource capture. In Angola and Zimbabwe, younger patronage networks have taken over from ageing strongmen only to reinforce, or even intensify, systems of corruption and exclusion. The often dubious outcomes of transition processes in Eastern Europe and South-East Asia show that these processes are not unique to sub-Saharan Africa. As Jean-François Bayart has described, this pattern of 'reciprocal elite assimilation' ensures that old networks are simply recycled through new faces, without substantive change.⁴⁰

In South Sudan, the risk of such elite recycling is real. A new generation of kleptocrats is already emerging. They are visible in different guises: successful businessmen and, increasingly, businesswomen, whose investment

37. Jan Pospisil, 'South Sudan: resuming oil exports, resuming hope?', *Geeska* (2025).

38. *The Sentry*, 'Sanctioned South Sudanese businessmen are skirting US sanctions' (Sentry alert, The Sentry, Washington, DC, October 2021).

39. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why nations fail: The origins of power, prosperity and poverty* (Profile, London, 2012).

40. Jean-François Bayart, *The state in Africa: The politics of the belly* (Polity, Cambridge, 2009).

sources and revenue streams remain opaque; sons and daughters of the military elite, whose lifestyles are wildly out of proportion to any declared income; and a growing, entitled class of ruthless, ambitious politicians eager to transform their kleptocratic practices into the new norm of governance.

The case of the new Vice President, Benjamin Bol Mel is instructive. His ascent embodies the likely pattern ahead: a figure whose limitless appetite to eat from the public table, exemplified by allegations of his refusal to even regularly pay employees at companies used to siphon public funds,⁴¹ helped exhaust South Sudan's already fragile financial system.

In December 2017, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned Bol Mel under the Global Magnitsky Act for his involvement in significant corruption, including the misappropriation of public assets and the abuse of government contracts.⁴² These sanctions remain in effect, despite significant efforts by the South Sudanese government, and Bol Mel himself, to have them removed.⁴³ It is safe to assume that practices such as those linked to Bol Mel significantly contributed to the erosion of South Sudan's financial credibility and the cessation of international lending. Such stories serve as cautionary examples of how systemic corruption can reach significant heights that even international financing dries up, pushing a state toward economic bankruptcy.

Yet this bleak outlook only tells half of the story. There is also a highly talented, often internationally educated new generation emerging that has the potential to steer South Sudan away from elite-recycling kleptocracy. Many of them work within international organizations, including the United Nations, while others are found in the private sector, civil society, or small-scale entrepreneurial ventures. Ironically, they suffer doubly under current conditions: not only do international aid cuts and a challenging business environment shrink job opportunities, but they are also expected to support extended family networks suffering from the economic crisis, who perceive them as relatively affluent.

These individuals—businesspeople, lawyers, development professionals—represent a genuine alternative to the established modalities of South Sudan's political marketplace. Yet, paradoxically, their very integrity and distance from entrenched patronage networks make it exceedingly difficult for them to access decision-making spaces. In a political system where money remains the highroad to power, those who have eschewed corruption find themselves effectively excluded.

41. Interviews with political observers, Juba, February and March 2025.

42. OFAC sanctions list search, <<https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/Details.aspx?id=23283>> (25 April 2025).

43. Interviews with political observers, Juba, February and March 2025.

Yet even for those who resist, complete detachment from the established kleptocratic networks is almost impossible. Many come from elite families themselves, and almost all have relatives who have profited from the system in one way or another. Within the tight-knit social circles that constitute South Sudanese society—circles that primarily exist among South Sudan's upper class able to transcend community affiliations in hubs like Juba, Nairobi, or even London—professional and personal relationships often overlap with the structures of reciprocal elite assimilation. In such an environment, where complicity is often a condition of survival, full isolation from the system is nearly unachievable.

South Sudan's critical juncture thus hinges not simply on the replacement of an ageing elite by whatever new personalities, but on whether the next generation will break from, or merely inherit, the entrenched structures of kleptocratic rule.

A stop to feeding the crisis

This critical juncture in South Sudan's political development risks being entirely missed if international actors remain trapped in the short-term logic of crisis management.⁴⁴ By focusing narrowly on preserving the peace process and containing periodic escalations, they have allowed themselves to be drawn into a dynamic largely choreographed by Juba's elite circles. They have become pawns in the tactical movements of South Sudan's political marketplace. Instead of supporting meaningful change, crisis management efforts achieve nothing reproducing the very structures that perpetuate instability.

As Joshua Craze and Ferenc Marko argue in their analysis of South Sudan's peace process, international efforts to salvage flawed agreements often paradoxically consolidate elite rule and deepen long-standing inequalities.⁴⁵ The focus on preserving a flawed settlement thus inadvertently strengthens the very dynamics it seeks to mitigate. The short-term stabilization priority is profoundly misguided for two fundamental reasons.

First, the current political system is unsustainable. Built around the personal rule of President Salva Kiir, it will inevitably unravel with his departure, ushering in a period of unavoidable disruption. Clinging to transitional arrangements, therefore, does not prevent crisis. It merely delays it, while

44. On the problematique of narrow-sighted approaches to the Sudans crises, see Alex de Waal and Abdul Mohammed, 'Defining the crisis in the Sudans: Lessons from the African Union High-Level Panels for Sudan and South Sudan' (Report, Thabo Mbeki Foundation and World Peace Foundation, Johannesburg, October 2024).

45. Joshua Craze and Ferenc David Marko, 'Death by peace: How South Sudan's peace agreement ate the grassroots', 6 January 2022, *African Arguments*, <https://africanarguments.org/2022/01/death-by-peace-how-south-sudans-peace-agreement-ate-the-grassroots/> (26 April 2025).

deepening the sclerosis of the governing networks. International hesitation around elections and the end to the formal transition period, particularly among the ‘Troika’ countries—the USA, the UK, and Norway—reflects a broader failure to confront this reality.⁴⁶ In effect, the strategy of endless transition prolongs the ‘no peace, no war’ status quo: preserving kleptocratic rule at the expense of political renewal.⁴⁷

Second, the emphasis on short-term stability empowers precisely those actors who have contributed to South Sudan’s deepening dysfunction. Figures deeply implicated in corruption and political decay increasingly present themselves as guarantors of peace and order. The recent portrayal of individuals like Vice President Benjamin Bol Mel as credible interlocutors illustrates the dangers of this approach. Those who have helped create the crisis should not be mistaken for the ones capable of resolving it. Elevating such actors does not stabilize the country; it only entrenches the patterns that will ultimately destabilize it further.

Banking on the continuity of power networks is symptomatic of a broader failure of international engagement. Tactics dominate over strategy. Rather than enabling the reproduction of kleptocratic networks through successive ‘young’ elites, international actors must shift their focus towards systemic change. The isolation of those who merely seek to inherit the politics of the belly, rather than reform it, should become a priority.

Ultimately, while the choice of political leadership will always remain a sovereign South Sudanese decision, international support should not be blind to the structures it reinforces. Breaking the cycle of elite recycling will require more than rhetorical support; it demands strategic investment in alternative pathways to power. Support for independent professional associations, young entrepreneurs, and technocratic leaders can help open the political space currently monopolized by money and patronage. Providing help to navigate the critical juncture ahead, rather than short-sightedly focusing on implementing a flawed peace agreement, should become a central priority. Both shifts require a decisive break from the largely ineffectual practices of supporting a Juba-based civil society and conducting conventional peacebuilding and constitution-making workshops.

46. *Radio Tamazuj*, ‘RJMEC endorses extension of transitional period as Troika abstain, lambast govt for failure’, 18 September 2024, <<https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/rjmec-endorses-extension-of-transitional-period-as-troika-abstain-lambast-govt-for-failure>> (26 April 2025).

47. On the concrete implications of this situations on everyday security, see Sophia Dawkins, Christopher Oringa, David Deng and Jan Pospisil, ‘Perceptions of peace in South Sudan: Patterns in perceptions of safety since the 2018 R-ARCSS’ (Briefing, PeaceRep and Detro, University of Edinburgh, 2023). The situation, to an extent, resembles the ‘no peace, no war’ state in the South right after Sudanese independence, see Øystein H. Rolandsen, ‘A false start: Between war and peace in the Southern Sudan, 1956–62’, *The Journal of African History* 52, 1 (2011), pp. 105–123.

The decisive message is clear: international engagement must stop feeding the crisis. It must shift its focus from salvaging a hollow peace process to investing in the generational change that South Sudan urgently needs. South Sudan is not alone in facing the challenge of elite recycling versus political renewal. Across the continent, the end of liberation-era leadership has opened critical junctures—moments when new generations either reproduce old systems or chart new paths. Whether South Sudan's next generation will break with the politics of the belly will not be decided by peace processes alone, but by the deeper political choices made now.