SURVEY

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Trends in Civic Space and Elections in South Sudan:

Findings from the Seventh Round of the Public Perceptions of Peace Survey

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the seventh round of the Public Perceptions of Peace Survey, conducted in 2026 by Detcro on behalf of PeaceRep and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Raising Civil Voices programme. The sample comprises 4,530 respondents across 15 counties. Separately surveyed displacement camps bring the number of reporting locations to 18. Results describe the surveyed populations and are not nationally weighted electorate estimates.

Public demand for elections remains strong amid deteriorating security. Confidence in important conditions for credible competition has weakened. The findings identify several developments:

- **Perceptions of peace and 'everyday safety' have deteriorated considerably**. The average EPI safety score fell from 3.70 in 2024 to 3.42 in 2026. Only 40.5% consider South Sudan at peace, compared with 66.4% in 2024. Safety declined severely in the Juba and Rubkona IDP camp samples.

- **Appetite for elections persists, also among people anticipating election-related violence**. Support for elections as scheduled in December 2026 rose from 67.2% to 73.2%. Roughly three-quarters of respondents expecting high electoral-violence risk favour elections by December in both waves. The principal increase in demand occurs among those expecting lower risk.

- **Concern about renewed war remains widespread**. Two-thirds of the respondents assess electoral-violence risk as high, while 53.1% agree that elections could cause renewed civil war. Respondents reporting conflict-related family harm are more likely to endorse a specific justification for violently contesting an electoral outcome.

- **Political space remains restricted, with confidence sharply divided by party preference**. Half feel unsafe speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues. Confidence that the National Elections Commission (NEC) can organise credible elections fell from 64.0% to 58.4%. Respondents choosing the SPLM-IO as the party with the best vision report substantially less speaking safety and lower institutional confidence than those choosing the SPLM-IG.

- **Support for the governing party has declined**. The SPLM-IG's share of party-vision responses fell from 60.6% to 53.7%, while the share saying no party offers a good vision rose from 12.0% to 16.4%. The SPLM-IO recorded a smaller increase. The party-vision question serves as the survey's proxy for electoral preference.

- **Democratic expectations remain substantial**. Established local democratic practices and vigorous political debate provide foundations for electoral participation. In the survey, 81.1% endorse individual voting choice. Women express strong demand for expanded representation: 68.0% want the existing 35% quota increased, compared with 35.5% of men.

Elections could clarify who has authority to govern and give citizens a practical means of holding leaders accountable. Their contribution would depend on whether people can compete safely and challenge results through credible procedures. Further postponement would leave substantial public demand unanswered. Yet, proceeding would leave unresolved concerns about the fairness of the contest.

1.
Introduction: Elections and the Unresolved Transition

When this survey series last reported, in September 2025, South Sudan faced a familiar set of choices. The transitional period had been extended in September 2024 to accommodate elections in December 2026, while the detention of former First Vice President Riek Machar from the SPLM-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) had deepened disputes over the implementation of the peace agreement. A year on, the Presidency moved ahead with the electoral timetable. In December 2025, President Kiir and party leaders agreed to defer the census and the permanent constitution-making process until after the elections.[1] In September 2026, the legal requirements for holding elections were changed by de-linking the implementation of critical peace agreement tasks from holding general elections through a constitutional amendment.[2]

The National Elections Commission (NEC) has announced 22 December 2026 as the polling date. Whether elections can command agreement among the parties remains contested, despite an inter-party dialogue held in Juba in late September and early October 2026.[3] RJMEC has called for inclusive dialogue to establish a shared pathway towards elections and for the completion of outstanding commitments under the 2018 peace agreement.[4]

Security conditions have also deteriorated since the last report. Renewed fighting between government and opposition forces intensified in Jonglei from late December 2025, causing large-scale displacement. These developments affect the circumstances in which people would register and vote. The survey examines how people assess the risks of elections against their own experiences of insecurity.

South Sudan has yet to hold a general election since independence in 2011. Southern Sudan participated in the 2010 elections, followed by the referendum on self-determination in 2011. Political participation also has roots in community life. Research documents established practices of electing local leaders and holding them accountable, alongside vigorous debate over how the country should be governed. Such practices vary across communities, and access to decision-making is uneven.[5] Nonetheless, they provide an important basis for understanding what citizens expect from national elections.

The survey offers evidence on these democratic expectations. Respondents express views about their freedom to choose how to vote and about the role of their families and communities in that choice. Questions on term limits and the selection of presidential candidates examine expectations of political accountability. These responses deserve attention alongside the restrictions people report on speaking publicly about politics. Community involvement in political choice can include discussion and negotiation; its relationship to individual autonomy needs to be examined through the responses themselves.

The seventh wave of the Public Perceptions of Peace Survey draws on interviews across 15 counties in 2026.[6] It finds that substantial demand for elections coexists with concern about electoral violence. Support for holding elections by December remains high among respondents who expect a high risk of violence, while demand among those expecting low risk has strengthened since 2025. This makes the conditions of electoral participation central to the report's argument. It examines whether respondents believe they can exercise political choice safely and whether the proposed vote can address their expectations of government. Differences across counties and community backgrounds help explain how these judgements vary.

Following this introduction, Section 2 sets out the methods and scope. Section 3 examines whether respondents consider South Sudan to be at peace and relates their assessments to experiences of insecurity. Section 4 considers demand for elections and the conditions respondents believe

1 Michael Daniel, 'Kiir, parties defer census and constitution to post-2026 in final election plan', Eye Radio, 11 December 2025. https://www.eyeradio.org/kiir-parties-defer-census-and-constitution-to-post-2026-in-final-election-plan/.

2 Constitutional Amendment No. 13 signed on 2 September 2026; see ConstitutionNet, 'South Sudan's president signs constitutional amendment clearing the way for elections', 3 September 2026, http://constitutionnet.org/news/south-sudans-president-signs-constitutional-amendment-clearing-way-elections.

3 Luke Anami, 'Interparty dialogue: South Sudan polls talks stutter as opposition stay away', The East African, 3 October 2026. https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/interparty-dialogue-south-sudan-polls-talks-5618050.

4 Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), 'RJMEC urges parties to uphold the R-ARCSS as South Sudan enters critical phase of transition', press release, Juba. https://www.jmecsouthsudan.org/index.php/press-release/item/837-rjmec-urges-parties-to-uphold-the-r-arcss-as-south-sudan-enters-critical-phase-of-transition.

5 Nicki Kindersley, Elections in South Sudan: Lessons from Everyday Democracy. Nairobi, Rift Valley Institute, 2025. https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/South-Sudan-Election-Delays_final.pdf.

6 For the interactive survey dashboard, see https://peacerep.org/perceptions-peace-south-sudan/.

would justify postponement. Section 5 examines political violence and the risks associated with concluding the transition. Section 6 addresses political space and the prospects for credible competition. Section 7 explores expectations of representation, including political choice and community voting norms. The conclusion finally considers what elections could resolve and which disputes would remain.

2.
Methods and Scope

Wave 7 data collection followed the approach used in prior rounds, with sampling stratified within each of the 15 survey counties by settlement type and IDP-camp environment. Sampling locations were identified using the GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents dataset. Female-male enumerator pairs conducted random-walk sampling from randomly generated map coordinates. Interviews were held in languages people were most comfortable to respond in, recorded through KoboToolbox on enumerators' smartphones during two fieldwork windows: February-April and August-September 2026.[7]

The questionnaire retained the core Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI)[8] safety battery and the election-readiness questions used in previous waves. It also continued the civic-space module. New questions examined attitudes towards the trial of senior opposition leaders. Further additions covered reductions in foreign assistance and the effects of the war in Sudan. This report focuses on the questions relevant to electoral participation and the conclusion of the transition; the other modules will inform separate outputs.

The cleaned analytical sample comprises 4,530 respondents, including 2,272 women (50.2%) and 2,254 men (49.8%). Gender was missing for four respondents. The first fieldwork window (February–April 2026) accounts for 2,372 interviews and the second (August–September 2026) for 2,158.

Table 1 shows the distribution by county and gender.

Table 1. *Achieved sample by county and gender, Wave 7 (2026).*

County	Women	Men	Total	% of Sample
Juba	199	187	386	8.5%
Rubkona	191	170	362	8.0%
Rubkona IDP	215	146	361	8.0%
Renk	173	175	348	7.7%
Torit	185	158	343	7.6%
Malakal	105	213	318	7.0%
Pibor	111	143	254	5.6%
Gogrial West	116	130	246	5.4%
Bor South	127	116	243	5.4%
Yirol West	119	118	239	5.3%
Rumbek Centre	115	120	235	5.2%
Malakal IDP	110	124	234	5.2%
Aweil Centre	107	120	227	5.0%
Juba IDP	118	74	192	4.2%
Yambio	89	101	190	4.2%
Wau	75	86	161	3.6%
Yei	78	65	144	3.2%
Jur River	39	8	47	1.0%
Total	**2,272**	**2,254**	**4,530**	**100.0%**

Note: IDP locations identify the separately surveyed camp samples in Rubkona, Juba and Malakal. Totals include four respondents with missing gender: one in Rubkona, two in Yirol West and one in Yei. Percentages use the full cleaned sample and may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

7 An academic article on the survey methodology is in press: Sophia Dawkins, Jan Pospisil, David Deng and Christopher Oringa, 'When Surveys Meet Crises', *Civil Wars* (2026, forthcoming), https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2026.2689880.

8 Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty, 'Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators', *International Studies Review* 19.1 (2017): 6-27.

The sample is concentrated in the working-age groups. Respondents aged 25–34 account for 31.7%, and those aged 35–44 for 29.4%. The remaining adult age groups comprise 18–24 (13.6%), 45–54 (15.8%), 55–64 (7.0%) and 65 or older (2.3%). A majority of respondents were married: 54.8% reported monogamous marriages and 25.5% polygamous marriages. Another 12.9% had never married, while 4.1% were widowed and 2.4% divorced or separated. Marital status was obtained through separate questions for women and men, which were combined for this profile.

Educational attainment was low. Some 39.8% reported no formal schooling, while 21.9% had completed primary education. Secondary education accounted for 26.0%, and a further 11.6% reported college or university education. Other educational backgrounds accounted for 0.4%.

The Dinka (31.7%) and Nuer (23.0%) were the largest ethnolinguistic groups represented. Other sizeable groups included the Shilluk (7.4%), Murle (5.0%), Lotuko (4.8%) and Zande (3.9%). The remaining respondents identified with numerous smaller communities.

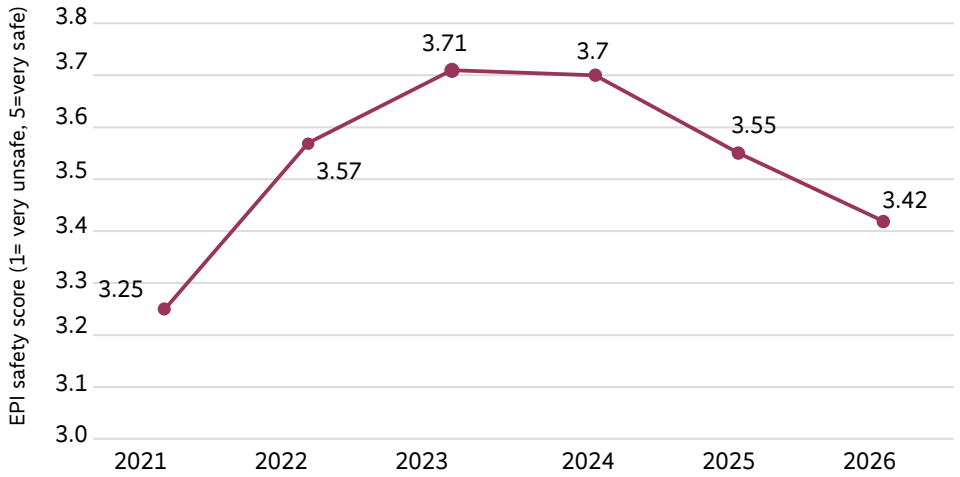
All respondent-profile percentages in this section use the full cleaned sample of 4,530. Subsequent analyses identify the denominator used for each question or comparison. Differences between waves describe changes across successive samples – the survey does not follow the same individuals over time. The findings cover the populations reached in the 15 survey counties. In this report, pooled results are not nationally weighted estimates of South Sudan's electorate.

3.
Is South Sudan at Peace? Experiences of Insecurity

The multi-year improvement in perceived safety tracked by this survey has given way to substantial declines in 2025 and 2026. The average Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) safety score fell to 3.42 in 2026, down from 3.55 in 2025. This follows a period of relative stability in 2023–2024, when the score stood at approximately 3.70 (Figure 1). The index averages five questions about safety in everyday settings, scored from 1, very unsafe, to 5, very safe.

Average EPI Safety Score by Year (2021–2026)

Figure 1

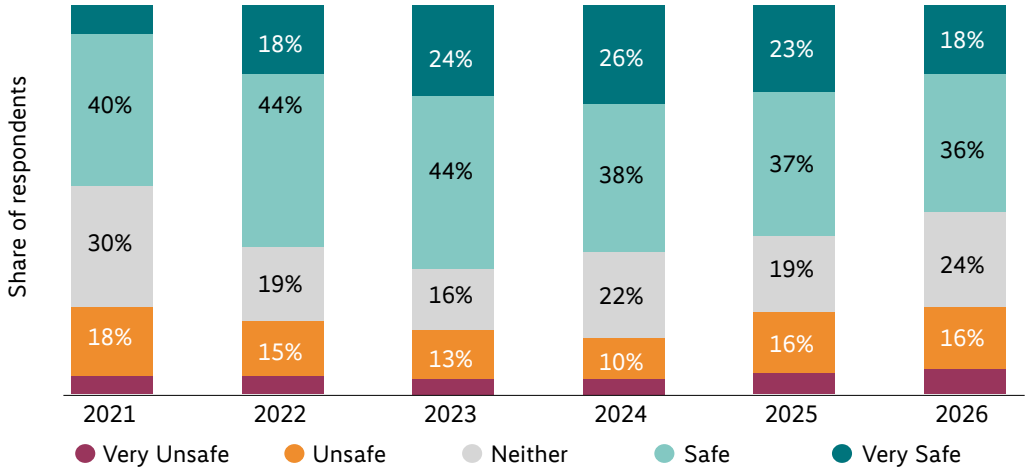


2021-2023: composite scores as recorded in earlier waves; 2024-2026: respondents answering all five EPI items

The distributional picture shows a shrinking 'very safe' category, from 25.9% in 2024 to 17.7% in 2026. Over the same period, the proportion whose average score falls within the unsafe or very unsafe categories rose from 14.4% to 22.2% (Figure 2). The deterioration therefore includes a substantial loss of confidence among those who previously reported comparatively high levels of safety.

Aggregate Perceived Safety by Year (2021–2026)

Figure 2



Respondent mean scores grouped at 1.5, 2.5, 3.5, 4.5; valid scores only

Note: Categories group respondents' average EPI scores using the boundaries shown in the graph.

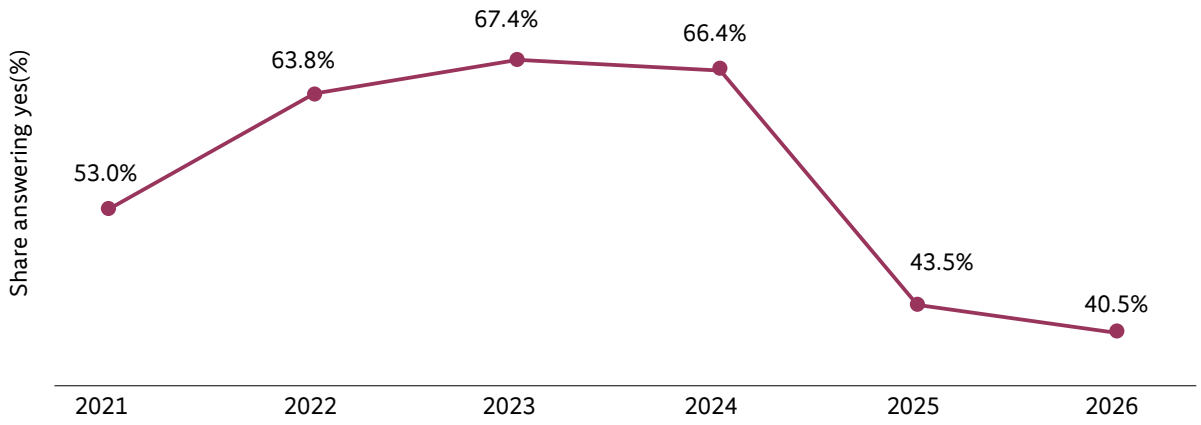
Everyday insecurity and judgements of national peace

The decline in perceived safety is accompanied by an even sharper deterioration in whether respondents believe South Sudan is currently 'at peace'. Only 40.5% answered yes in 2026, down from 43.5% in 2025 and 66.4% in 2024 (Figure 3). Most of this reversal occurred between 2024 and 2025, a period that included the escalation of fighting around Nasir in early 2025. That crisis triggered further fighting, especially in Upper Nile, Unity and Jonglei, and is likely to have contributed to the decline.[9] The latest wave records a further decline.

The questions capture different judgements. Respondents may feel relatively safe in their immediate surroundings while considering the country's political conflict unresolved. The national-peace question allows them to assess the wider situation beyond the everyday activities covered by the EPI. There is also the question of comparison: as with the EPI items, answers to this question reflect perceptions, which often register relative change rather than an objective assessment of the situation.

Is South Sudan at Peace? Share Answering Yes (2021–2026)

Figure 3



Percentages exclude missing and not-answered responses in every year.

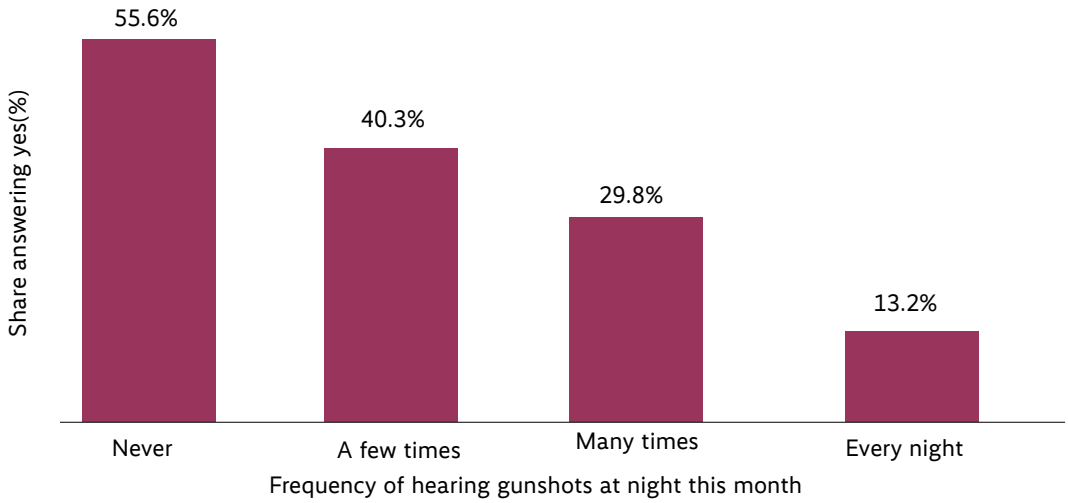
Reported exposure to gunfire connects these wider judgements to local experience. Among respondents who had not heard any gunshots at night during the month of interview, 55.6% considered South Sudan at peace. This proportion was 40.3% among those hearing gunshots a few times, falling to 29.8% among those hearing them many times and 13.2% among those hearing them every night (Figure 4).

This relationship also appears within some reporting locations. In Juba outside the camp sample, 47.3% of respondents hearing gunshots never or a few times considered the country at peace, compared with 15.7% of those hearing them frequently. The relationship is uneven across locations: Malakal outside the camp shows little corresponding difference. Gunfire and national-peace judgements are associated, although the survey cannot establish that one causes the other. Hearing gunshots also measures a different experience from being directly attacked.

9 Samson Liberty, 'Life begins to return to Nasir a year after deadly clashes caused mass loss of life and displacement', UNMISS, 22 April 2026. https://unmiss.unmissions.org/en/news/life-begins-to-return-to-nasir-a-year-after-deadly-clashes-caused-mass-loss-of-life-and.

Is South Sudan at Peace? By Reported Gunfire (2026)

Figure 4



Paired substantive answer; n=4.421. Association does not establish causation

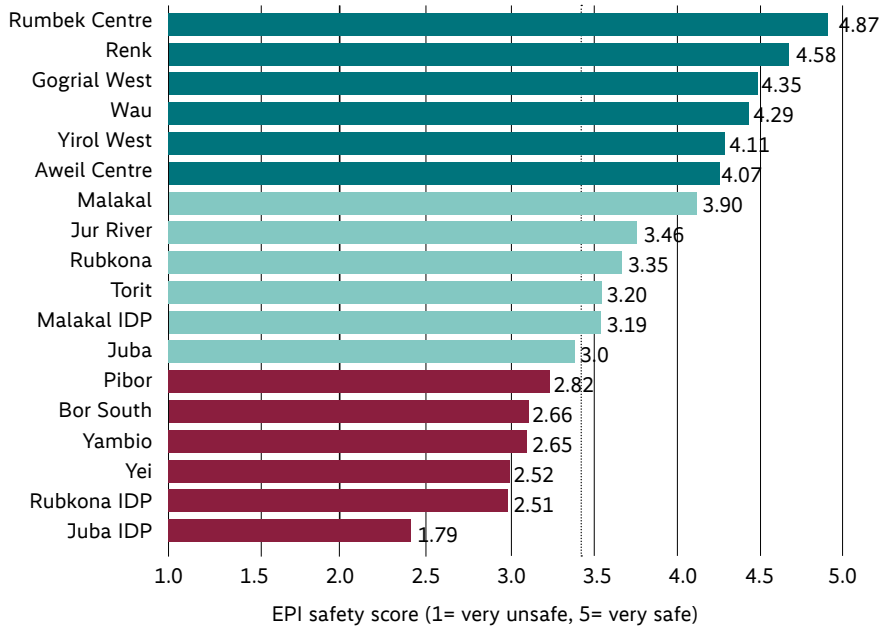
Local differences and changes in safety

The overall decline conceals large differences across the 18 reporting locations (Figure 5). Juba IDP records the lowest EPI score, at 1.79, followed by Rubkona IDP at 2.51. Among the non-camp reporting locations, Yei and Yambio remain particularly insecure, with scores of 2.52 and 2.65 respectively. Rumbek Centre records the highest score, at 4.87, while Renk stands at 4.58.

Camp residents report lower average safety than other respondents in each of the three counties surveyed separately in this way. The largest gap is in Juba, where the non-camp score is 3.00. Such differences would be obscured by combining camp and non-camp interviews into a single county average.

Wave 7 (2026) EPI Safety Score by Location

Figure 5



Dashed line; overal survey-sample mean, IDP denotes the camp sample

Note: The dashed line marks the overall survey-sample mean of 3.42. IDP denotes the separately surveyed camp sample.

The year-on-year comparisons identify substantial deterioration beyond the camps. Rubkona's non-camp score fell from 4.35 in 2025 to 3.35 in 2026, a decline of almost one point. Yirol West fell from 4.65 to 4.11. Positive developments are also visible: Wau recovered from 3.99 to 4.29, while Malakal's non-camp score rose from 3.69 to 3.90. Both now stand slightly above their 2024 levels.

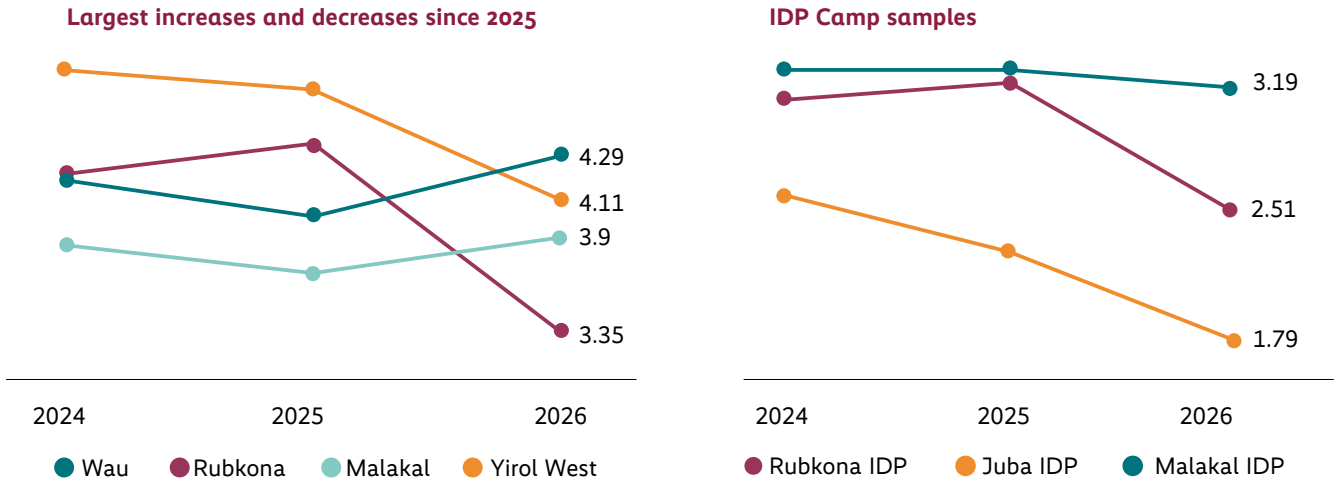
The Lakes State results warrant particular attention. Earlier research documented substantial security improvements under Governor Rin Tueny, alongside concerns about the durability of an approach concentrated heavily around his personal authority. His removal in January 2026 preceded Wave 7 fieldwork, and his reappointment as a caretaker governor in late September 2026 came after the Wave 7 data collection had concluded. Yirol West's decline is consistent with concerns about the vulnerability of those gains following a leadership change. Rumbek Centre, however, remained close to its previous score, declining only from 4.95 to 4.87. The survey therefore provides evidence of deterioration in Yirol West during the period following his departure. It cannot, however, isolate the effect of the change of governor.[10]

Deteriorating camp conditions and Malakal's distinct trajectory

The decline in perceived safety is especially severe in the Juba and Rubkona camp samples. Juba IDP's score fell from 2.56 in 2024 to 2.24 in 2025, reaching 1.79 in 2026. Rubkona IDP declined sharply over the latest year, from 3.18 to 2.51. Malakal IDP camp followed a different trajectory: its score remained broadly stable, at approximately 3.20 throughout 2024–2026 (Figure 6).

Changes in EPI Safety Scores (2024–2026)

Figure 6



Note: The left panel shows selected non-camp locations with the largest increases and decreases since 2025, excluding Jur River from selection because of its small sample. The right panel shows the three camp samples separately.

These camps occupy different positions within South Sudan's political conflict. Juba and Rubkona shelter predominantly Nuer populations with strong historical connections to opposition constituencies. Many residents sought protection from government forces during the civil war and continue to view those forces with distrust. Research in Juba documents how residents' efforts to remain safe after the transfer of camp security to government authorities have restricted their movement and ability to earn a living. This history helps explain why renewed political confrontation can carry particularly acute implications for people who remain displaced.[11]

10 Jan Pospisil, Changing Lakes State? Rin Tueny's Inclusive Deterrence Approach in Practice. HSBA Briefing Paper. Nairobi, Small Arms Survey, 2023. https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Lakes_state_BP_WEB.pdf. See also Sudans Post, 'Gen. Rin Tueny thanks Kiir, backs successor after removal as Lakes State governor', 21 January 2026. https://www.sudanspost.com/gen-rin-tueny-thanks-kiir-backs-successor-after-removal-as-lakes-state-governor/. On 9 October 2026, heavy fighting erupted within Rumbek town, reportedly killing at least 71 people, and illustrating how quickly the security situation can shift. Radio Tamazuj, 'Preliminary report puts death toll at 71 in Rumbek clashes', 9 October 2026. https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/preliminary-report-puts-death-toll-at-71-in-rumbek-clashes.

11 Tot Janguan and Tom Kirk, 'Hiding in plain sight: IDP's protection strategies after closing Juba's protection of civilian sites', *Global Policy*, policy analysis, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13206.

Malakal's camp population has been reshaped by violent displacement. Following clashes in June 2023, approximately 6,000-7,000 Nuer residents fled the site. UNMISS reported that only Shilluk residents remained at that point, describing the camp as 'monoethnic'.[12] A subsequent Danish Refugee Council assessment also records the departure of the Nuer population for Malakal town.[13] The camp had thus been largely emptied of its Nuer residents before the three-year comparison presented here.

Its political relationship with the government also differs from those of the other two camps. Research identifies the Malakal's camp leadership as strongly aligned with the Shilluk Agwelek, with the movement's forces incorporated into the government's military coalition. This provides a plausible context for the different safety trajectory. The alliance remains contested among residents: the same research documents dissatisfaction over unresolved land claims and fears of renewed conflict.[14] Government alignment offers an incomplete explanation of the camp's relative stability.

Malakal's stable score describes the residents surveyed in the camp in each year. It cannot establish whether those driven out became safer. The distinction matters when interpreting apparent stability in a place whose population has already been changed by violence.

12 UNMISS, 'Statement by Nicholas Haysom, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of UNMISS, to the Security Council', 20 June 2023. https://unmiss.unmissions.org/en/press-releases/statement-nicholas-haysom-special-representative-un-secretary-general-and-3.

13 Danish Refugee Council, Malakal PoC Headcount and Intention Survey – September 2024. ReliefWeb, 2024. https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/malakal-poc-headcount-and-intention-survey-september-2024.

14 Joshua Craze, The Periphery Cannot Hold: Upper Nile since the Signing of the R-ARCSS. HSBA Report. Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2022, pp. 13, 29, 44. https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-HSBA-Upper-Nile-Report-WEB.pdf. See also Joshua Craze, Displaced and Immiserated: The Shilluk of Upper Nile in South Sudan's Civil War, 2014–19. HSBA Report. Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2019.

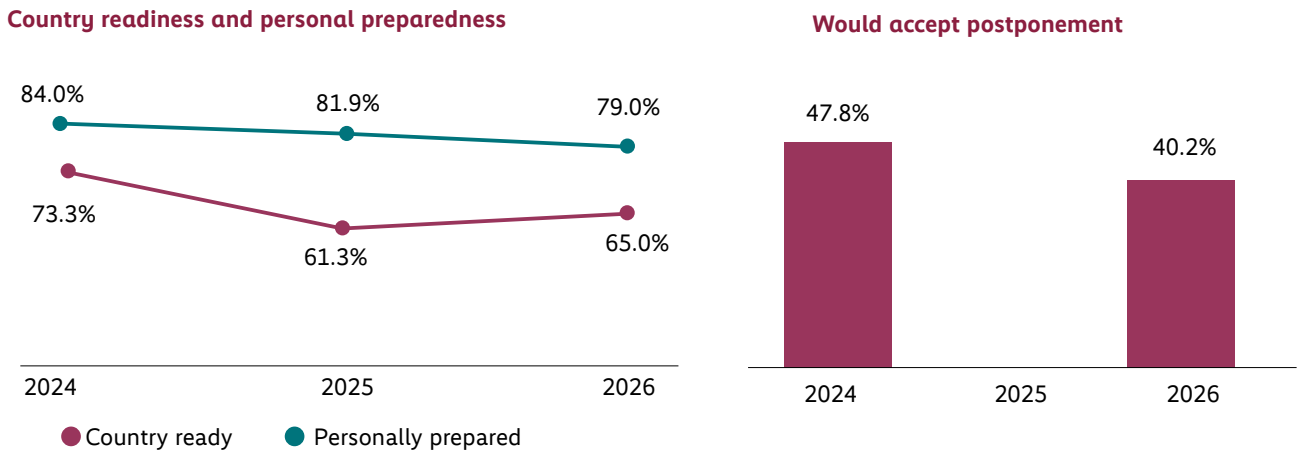
4.
Demand for Elections and Conditions for Postponement

Despite the deteriorating security and peace picture set out in Section 3, public appetite for elections has persisted. Agreement that 'South Sudan is ready for elections' rose from 61.3% in 2025 to 65.0% in 2026. It remains below the 73.3% recorded in 2024, before the latest postponement. Willingness to accept another delay has declined: 40.2% would support postponement if the necessary conditions were not in place by December 2026, compared with 47.8% in 2025.

Feeling personally prepared to vote remains widespread, although it has declined slightly, from 84.0% in 2024 to 81.9% in 2025 and 79.0% in 2026 (Figure 7). Respondents' assessments of the country's readiness and their own preparedness therefore follow different trajectories. Greater agreement that elections can proceed has emerged alongside a gradual decline in personal confidence about participating.

Election Readiness and Willingness to Postpone (2024–2026)

Figure 7



Agreement combines agree/strongly. Postponement refers to necessary conditions remaining unmet

Note: Readiness and preparedness combine 'agree' and 'strongly agree'. Postponement records willingness to accept a delay if critical peace agreement tasks remain unimplemented. Percentages exclude unanswered responses to each question; neutral agreement responses remain in the denominator. The postponement comparison covers 2025–2026.

Preferred election timing

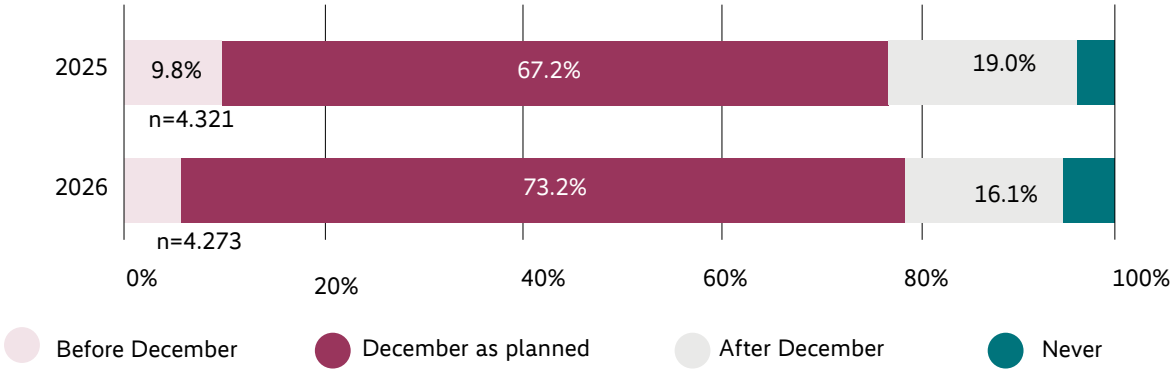
The share wanting elections held as planned in December 2026 rose from 67.2% in 2025 to 73.2% in 2026. Support for an earlier election declined from 9.8% to 5.7%. Combining these responses, 78.8% now want elections by December, compared with 76.9% a year earlier (Figure 8). The increase in support for the scheduled date is consequently larger than the increase in demand for elections by December overall.

The distinction matters because both waves refer to the same December 2026 deadline. As that date approaches, the opportunity for an earlier election narrows. Movement towards the scheduled date may partly reflect this changing timetable.

Support for postponing elections until after December fell from 19.0% to 16.1%. The share saying elections should never be held increased slightly, from 4.1% to 5.1%. This remains a small minority, although its growth cautions against describing the movement towards the scheduled date as uniform.

Figure 8. Preferred Timing of Elections (2025–2026)

Figure 8



Valid election-date answers. Both waves refer to December 2026

Note: Percentages use substantive election-date answers: 4,321 respondents in 2025 and 4,273 in 2026. Both waves ask about elections scheduled for December 2026. 'Before December' and 'December as planned' remain separate response categories.

Acceptance of postponement and electoral sequencing

The survey's questions about unfinished transition tasks reveal considerable overlap between support for proceeding and preferences for completing those tasks first. A majority, 61.3%, agree with the December 2025 decision to defer constitution-making and the census in order to prioritise elections. Yet, 68.1% say the permanent constitution should be enacted before elections. Among respondents answering both questions, 39.0% endorse the decision to defer these processes while also preferring a constitution before the vote.

Acceptance of the political decision therefore coexists with a different preferred sequence. These answers provide limited grounds for interpreting support for de-linking as a rejection of constitution-making or its importance to the transition.

Asked which unfinished tasks would warrant postponement, 54.1% selected the return of IDPs and refugees to their homes, while 48.2% selected deployment of the necessary unified force. The census and permanent constitution were selected by 50.5% and 51.0% respectively. Completion of the Tumaini process received less support as a reason for delay, at 23.3%. At the same time, 42.9% selected the option that elections should proceed even if none of the listed tasks had been completed.[15]

The survey also asked whether elections for different offices should be sequenced or held simultaneously. A majority, 65.8%, favour voting for all positions at the same time, against 34.2% who prefer a sequenced process. This preference concerns the organisation of the elections themselves. It is separate from the question of which transition tasks should precede them.

Election demand among respondents anticipating violence

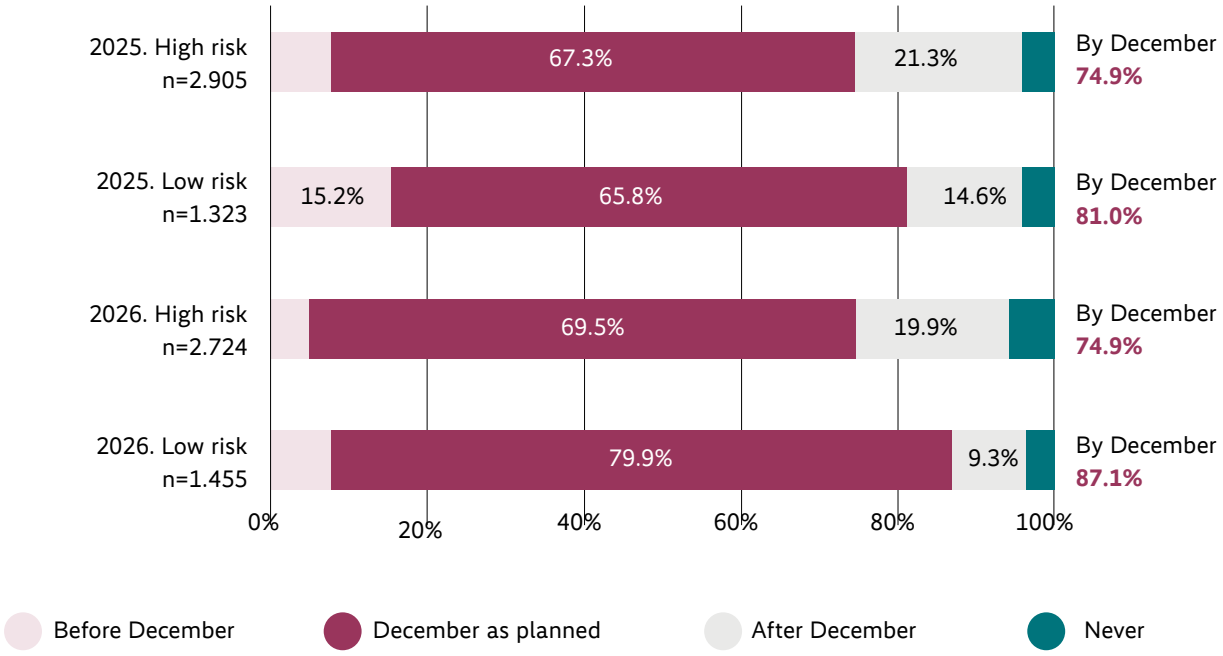
The persistence of election demand is particularly apparent among respondents who expect electoral violence. In 2026, 74.4% of those assessing the risk as high or very high want elections in December or earlier. This is almost unchanged from 74.9% in 2025 (Figure 9). Anticipated violence has thus coexisted with sustained demand for elections among this group across the two waves.

The main change appears among respondents expecting low or very low risk. Their support for elections by December rose from 81.0% to 87.1%. The widening difference between the risk groups reflects stronger demand among those expecting less violence, while demand among high-risk respondents remained broadly stable.

15 The unfinished-tasks question permits multiple responses. Percentages use the 4,285 respondents selecting at least one substantive option and do not sum to 100%. Of these, 742 selected both proceeding regardless and at least one unfinished task that would warrant delay. The selections therefore cannot be treated as mutually exclusive positions.

Figure 9. Election Timing by Anticipated Violence Risk (2025–2026)

Figure 9



Paired substantive answers. High/low groups combine the two corresponding risk categories

Note: High risk combines 'very high' and 'somehow high'. Low risk combines 'somehow low' and 'very low'. Percentages use respondents with substantive answers to both questions. The annotations combine preferences for elections before December and in December as planned.

Keeping the date categories separate reveals a further distinction. Among low-risk respondents, support for the scheduled December date rose from 65.8% to 79.9%, accompanied by a decline in preferences for an earlier election. Among high-risk respondents, scheduled-date support increased more modestly, from 67.3% to 69.5%.

Concern about violence nevertheless remains associated with greater willingness to postpone. In 2026, 19.9% of high-risk respondents favour elections after December, compared with 9.3% of low-risk respondents. Most people anticipating violence still want elections by the deadline, while a substantial minority favour delay. These answers establish neither that respondents consider the risks acceptable nor that they believe elections will reduce violence. They show how expectations of violence coexist with different preferences over when the transition should conclude.

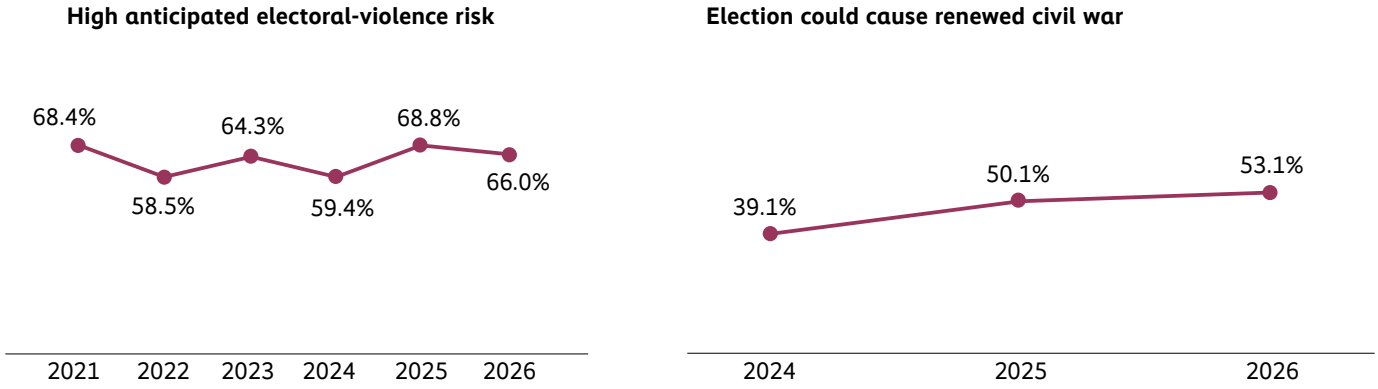
5.
Political Violence and the Risks of Concluding the Transition

Perceived risk of electoral violence remains close to the highest levels recorded in this survey series. Two-thirds of respondents, 66.0%, assessed the risk as 'very high' or 'somehow high' in 2026, compared with 68.8% in 2025. Expectations of violence have remained widespread throughout the transition, including during the years when perceptions of everyday safety were improving.

Fear that elections themselves could trigger a return to full-scale civil war has risen for a second consecutive year, from 39.1% in 2024 to 50.1% in 2025 and 53.1% in 2026 (Figure 10). General expectations of electoral violence have eased slightly since the previous wave, while concern about renewed civil war has continued to grow. A majority now agree with this more severe assessment of what elections could bring.

Perceived Risks of Elections

Figure 10



Electoral violence: 2021-2026. Renewed civil war; 2024-2026. Valid substantive answers

These are expectations of risk; not statements of willingness to use violence

Note: The left panel shows respondents assessing electoral-violence risk as 'very high' or 'somehow high', 2021–2026. The right panel shows agreement that elections could cause renewed civil war, 2024–2026. Percentages exclude unanswered responses. Neutral agreement responses remain in the denominator. Earlier waves concern the elections planned at the time of interview.

As Section 4 shows, these expectations coexist with persistent demand for elections. Roughly three-quarters of respondents anticipating high violence risk favour elections by December in both 2025 and 2026. Their support for proceeding cannot establish that they consider the risks acceptable. It does show that expectations of violence have not displaced the preference for elections among most people in this group.

Local insecurity and expectations of electoral violence

Recent experience of insecurity is associated with how respondents assess the electoral process. Among those who had never heard gunshots at night during the month of interview, 57.3% considered electoral-violence risk high. This rose to 85.2% among those hearing gunshots every night. Agreement that South Sudan is ready for elections moved in the opposite direction, from 69.1% to 48.1% (Figure 11, panel A).

These comparisons connect anticipated electoral violence to the environments in which respondents live. People experiencing frequent gunfire are more likely to expect violence around elections and less likely to judge the country ready to hold them. The survey cannot determine how much these differences reflect immediate insecurity or the wider political circumstances of the affected locations.

Hearing gunshots measures proximity to armed activity during a particular month. The conflict-related family-harm question concerns experiences over several years. Keeping these measures separate allows the survey to examine how immediate insecurity and past conflict experience relate to different electoral attitudes.

Family harm and acceptance of electoral violence

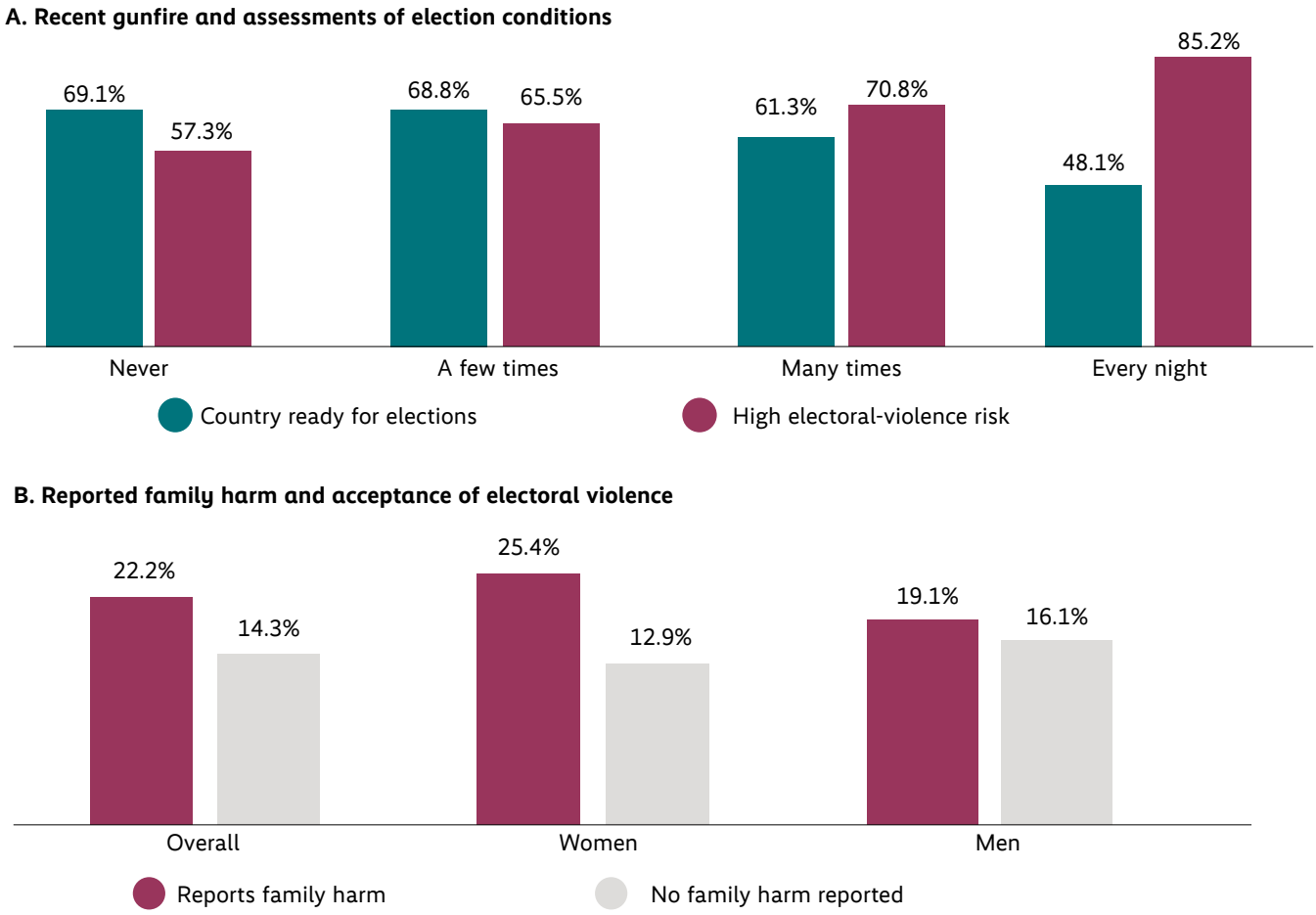
The survey asks whether a community would be justified in using violence to contest an election won by someone from a tribe that had harmed it in the past. Overall, 19.5% agree or strongly agree, while 68.9% disagree or strongly disagree. Most respondents therefore reject violence under this specific scenario, although a substantial minority endorse it.

Agreement is more common among respondents reporting that their family has been harmed by other groups during violent conflicts. Among this group, 22.2% endorse the justification for electoral violence, compared with 14.3% among those disagreeing with the family-harm statement (Figure 11, panel B). The association suggests that unresolved experiences of harm may shape how some respondents judge an electoral victory by someone associated with a former adversary.

The observed difference is larger among women. Agreement reaches 25.4% among women reporting family harm, compared with 12.9% among women disagreeing with the harm statement. Among men, the corresponding proportions are 19.1% and 16.1%. These are exploratory comparisons. Differences in respondents' circumstances may contribute to the pattern, and gender-matched enumeration limits the ability to separate respondent differences from interviewer effects.

Conflict Experience and Views of Elections (2026)

Figure 11



Panel B: agreeement with the specific conditional justification for contesting an election through violence

Neutral family-harm answers excluded from this contrast. Descriptive associations; no casual inference

Note: Panel A compares election assessments across reported frequencies of hearing gunshots at night. Panel B compares agreement with the conditional justification for electoral violence among respondents agreeing or disagreeing that their family has suffered conflict-related harm. Neutral family-harm responses are excluded from that comparison. Each percentage uses substantive answers to the relevant pair of questions.

Expecting violence and considering it justified remain distinct positions. Among respondents anticipating high electoral-violence risk, 20.7% endorse the conditional justification for using violence to contest an election. The much larger proportion expecting violence should therefore be understood as an assessment of danger. It provides no direct measure of willingness to participate in it.

The camp comparisons reinforce this distinction. Juba IDP and Rubkona IDP both experienced sharp declines in perceived safety, yet agreement with the justification for electoral violence differs substantially: 2.6% in Juba IDP and 33.6% in Rubkona IDP. Severe insecurity can coexist with very different views about the legitimacy of responding violently to an electoral outcome.

The family-harm comparison concerns a stated justification under a particular set of circumstances. It cannot predict who would mobilise or participate in violence. Its relevance lies in the connection respondents make between past collective harm and the legitimacy of a future electoral winner.

Interference and the credibility of the vote

The survey also asked directly about the integrity of the electoral process. Just under half of respondents, 48.9%, agree or strongly agree that organised forces will interfere with elections. A larger share, 57.4%, believe fraud is likely during the vote.

These concerns extend to respondents who want elections to proceed by December. Within that group, 47.7% anticipate interference by organised forces and 55.3% expect fraud. Support for the timetable thus coexists, within the same respondents, with substantial doubt about how the election will be conducted.

Concluding the transition through elections would place these concerns at the centre of political competition. The family-harm findings identify one potential difficulty: some respondents view the legitimacy of an electoral outcome through unresolved experiences of conflict. Expectations of interference and fraud raise questions about whether the process itself will be accepted as fair.

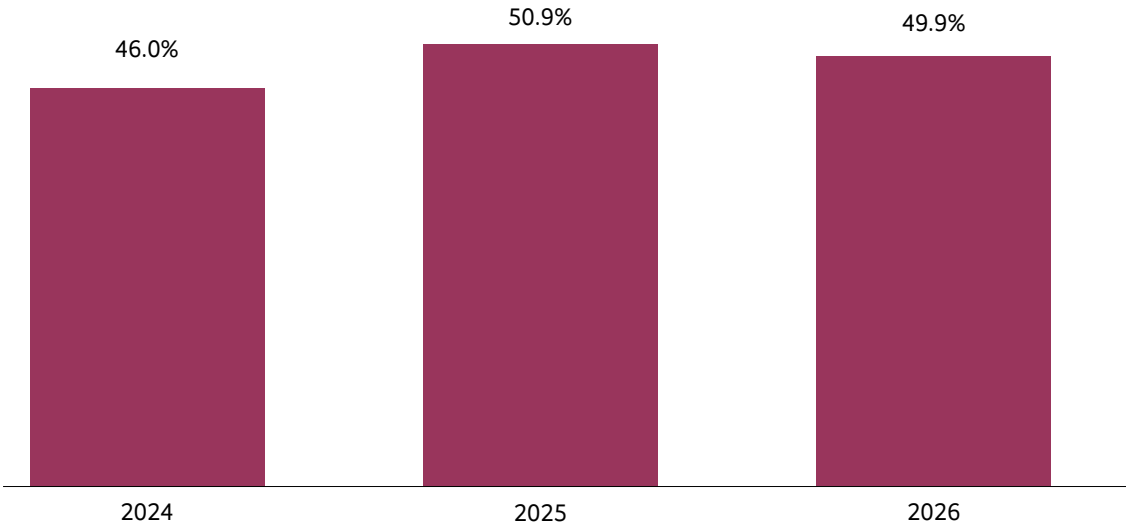
6.
Political Space and Credible Competition

Civic space remains constrained. Half of respondents, 49.9%, feel unsafe or very unsafe speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues in 2026, close to the 50.9% recorded in 2025 and above the 46.0% recorded in 2024 (Figure 12). The deterioration between 2024 and 2025 has persisted, with little change over the latest year.

Only 35.1% feel safe or very safe speaking publicly about politics. The remaining 15.0% give a neutral answer. These responses concern people's willingness to express political views in public, an important condition for meaningful electoral participation.

Feeling Unsafe Speaking Publicly about Politics (2024–2026)

Figure 12



Neutral family-harm answers excluded from this contrast. Descriptive associations; no casual inference

Note: Percentages combine 'unsafe' and 'very unsafe' among respondents giving substantive answers. Neutral responses remain in the denominator. The question measures perceived safety speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues.

Campaign freedom and confidence in electoral administration

Confidence in political space has softened modestly. Agreement that all political parties can campaign freely fell from 63.2% in 2025 to 59.6% in 2026. Confidence that the NEC can organise credible elections declined more sharply, from 64.0% to 58.4%.

Majorities continue to express confidence on both questions. Their assessments coexist with widespread concern about speaking publicly. Among respondents agreeing that parties can campaign freely, 40.6% nevertheless feel unsafe or very unsafe expressing views on politically sensitive issues. Perceived freedom for party campaigns can therefore coexist with personal caution about political expression.

This distinction matters for interpreting the conditions under which elections would take place. Respondents may believe that parties can organise campaigns while feeling unable to discuss contentious issues safely themselves. The survey does not identify the particular threats behind each answer, although it shows that assessments of campaign freedom extend beyond respondents' own sense of security.

Political preferences and unequal confidence

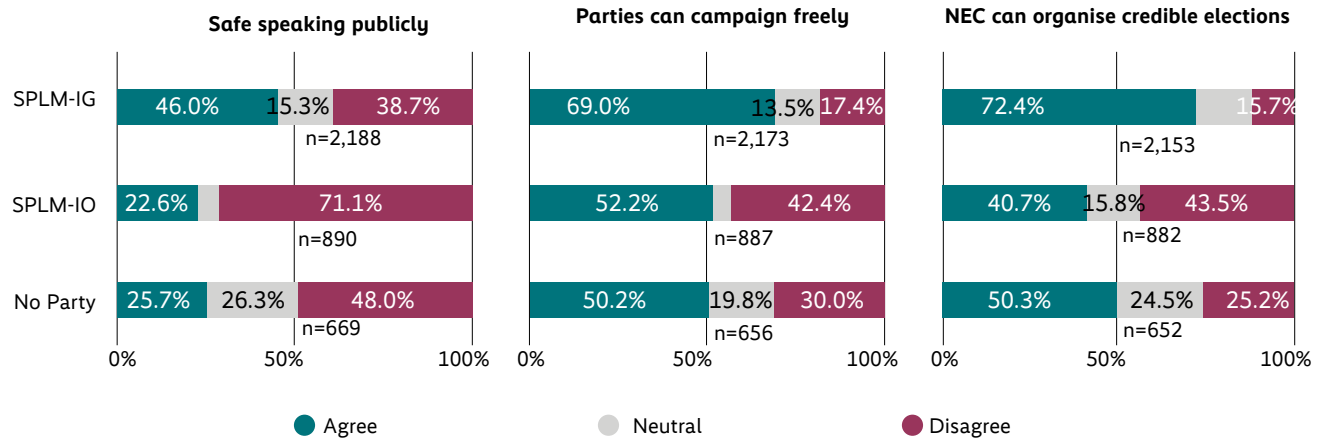
The overall figures conceal sharp differences by party preference (Figure 13). Respondents naming President Kiir's SPLM (SPLM-in-Government, SPLM-IG) as the party with the best vision for South Sudan report a substantially more open political environment than those naming the SPLM-IO.

Among those choosing the SPLM-IG, 46.0% feel safe speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues. The corresponding proportion among those choosing the SPLM-IO is 22.6%. Conversely, 71.1% of the SPLM-IO group feel unsafe, compared with 38.7% of the SPLM-IG group.

The pattern also appears in assessments of campaign freedom. Agreement that all parties can campaign freely reaches 69.0% among respondents choosing the SPLM-IG, compared with 52.2% among those choosing the SPLM-IO. Confidence in the NEC shows an even larger difference: 72.4% of the SPLM-IG group believe it can organise credible elections, against 40.7% of the SPLM-IO group.

Political Space and Election Credibility by Party Vision (2026)

Figure 13



Selected party-vision groups; valid answers within each group and measure. Full distributions include neutral responses

Note: Groups are defined by the question asking which political party has the best vision for South Sudan. 'No party' identifies respondents explicitly answering that none of the parties has a good vision. Each panel uses substantive answers to both relevant questions. Positive responses combine 'safe' and 'very safe' for speaking safety, or 'agree' and 'strongly agree' for the other statements. Neutral responses remain visible.

Respondents who see no party as offering a good vision also report limited confidence in speaking publicly: only 25.7% feel safe. Political caution therefore extends beyond those identifying the main opposition party as their preferred alternative.

These differences bear directly on the credibility of electoral competition. Confidence in the electoral commission is especially uneven across the principal political constituencies identified by the survey. Within the SPLM-IO group, 43.5% disagree that the NEC can organise credible elections, slightly exceeding the proportion expressing confidence. Any overall assessment of institutional preparedness needs to account for this division among the people expected to accept the result.

Political speaking safety across locations

Political speaking safety varies substantially across the 18 reporting locations (Figure 14). Juba IDP records the highest proportion feeling unsafe or very unsafe, at 98.4%. Outside the camp sample, the corresponding proportion in Juba is 51.7%.

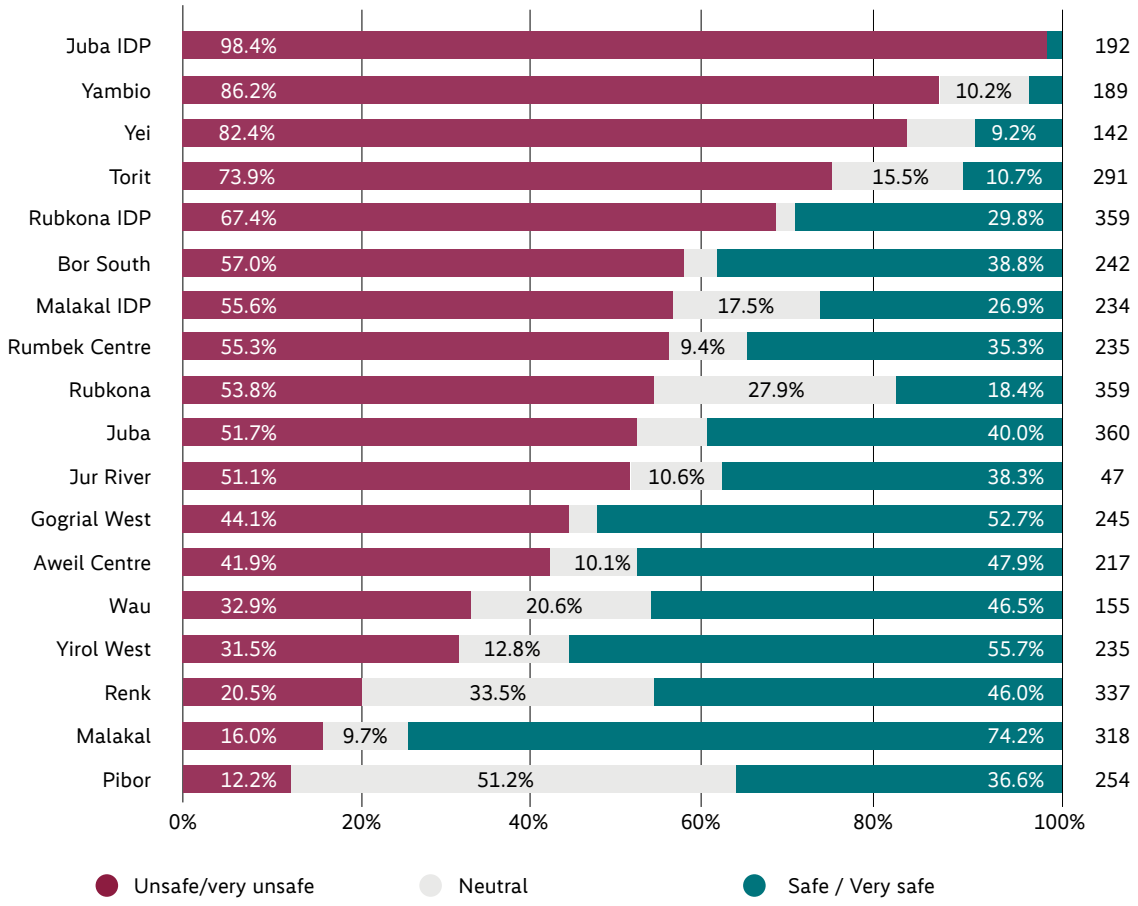
The camp and non-camp difference is also pronounced in Malakal. There, 55.6% of camp respondents feel unsafe speaking publicly, compared with 16.0% of other respondents in the county. In all three counties with separately surveyed camps, camp respondents are more likely than other respondents to feel unsafe speaking publicly about politics, although the size of the difference varies.

High levels of political caution also extend beyond displacement camps. In Yambio, 86.2% feel unsafe speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues. Yei records 82.4%. These findings place restrictions on political expression alongside the low everyday-safety scores recorded in both locations in Section 3.

Perceptions of political space also differ among locations with Dinka-majority populations. Political speaking safety is relatively high in Greater Bahr el-Ghazal locations such as Yirol West and Aweil Centre, where 31.5% and 41.9% respectively feel unsafe. The situation is markedly different in Bor South in Greater Upper Nile, where 57.0% feel unsafe. Rumbek Centre departs from the Greater Bahr el-Ghazal pattern, with 55.3% feeling unsafe. This may reflect heightened intercommunal tensions in the area, which subsequently escalated into deadly fighting in Rumbek in October 2026, after fieldwork had concluded.[16]

Political Speaking Safety across 18 Locations (2026)

Figure 14



Valid speaking-safety answers. Camp samples separate in Juba, Malakal and Rubkona. Jur River has a small sample

Note: Bars show substantive responses grouped as unsafe or very unsafe, neutral, and safe or very safe. Juba, Malakal and Rubkona camp samples are reported separately from other respondents in those counties. Valid denominators appear beside the bars.

A low proportion reporting political unsafety does not necessarily mean that most respondents feel safe. In Pibor, only 12.2% report feeling unsafe, yet 51.2% give a neutral answer and 36.6% feel safe. Malakal's non-camp sample presents a different pattern: its relatively low level of reported unsafety accompanies a clear majority, 74.2%, feeling safe.

Everyday physical safety and political speaking safety can also diverge. Rumbek Centre has the highest EPI safety score in the survey, at 4.87, while 55.3% of respondents there feel unsafe speaking publicly about sensitive political issues. Its comparatively secure everyday environment coexists with considerable caution about expressing political views.

16 AFP, 'Intercommunal clashes kill 71 people in South Sudan', Al Jazeera, 10 October 2026. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/10/10/intercommunal-clashes-kill-71-people-in-south-sudan.

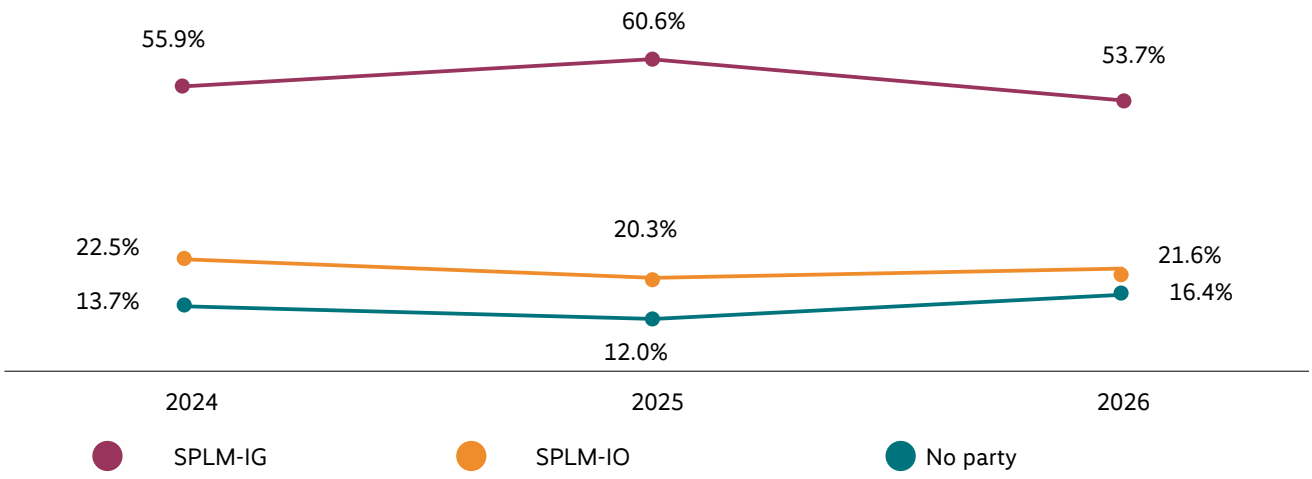
7.
Representation, Political Choice and Voting Norms

The rise in support for the ruling SPLM-IG between 2024 and 2025 has reversed. Asked which political party has the best vision for South Sudan, 53.7% of respondents named the SPLM-IG in 2026, down from 60.6% in 2025 and below the 55.9% recorded in 2024. The SPLM-IO's share increased modestly, from 20.3% to 21.6%. The proportion saying no political party has a good vision rose more substantially, from 12.0% to 16.4% (Figure 15).

The governing party continues to attract the largest share of responses. Its decline is accompanied by a growing rejection of the available party choices, alongside smaller increases for opposition parties. These changes concern the composition of responses across successive samples. They cannot identify which individuals changed their preferences or establish why they did so.

Which Party Has the Best Vision for South Sudan? (2024–2026)

Figure 15



Other parties remain in denominators but are not plotted. No party is an explicit substantive response

Note: The party-vision question serves as the survey's proxy for electoral preference. Percentages exclude unanswered responses and include other parties in the denominator, although their shares are not plotted. 'No party' is an explicit substantive answer. These are unweighted survey-sample shares.

Candidate preferences and expectations of government

Preferences for the principal party leaders to contest personally remained fairly stable. The largest share of respondents, 40.6%, want the incumbent President to stand as the SPLM candidate, compared with 38.8% in 2025. A further 27.5% prefer the party to nominate a new candidate, while 15.3% favour the President nominating another candidate. Support for party primaries declined from 23.6% to 16.6%.

The SPLM-IO question shows a similar pattern. Preference for the detained former First Vice President Machar to contest personally stood at 40.7%, compared with 39.9% in 2025. Support for the party nominating a new candidate rose from 26.1% to 30.3%, while preference for primaries fell from 22.9% to 16.6%. These questions capture views across the surveyed population, including people who favour other parties.

Asked what matters most in choosing a candidate, respondents ranked security first by a wide margin: 38.7% named it as the single most important factor, followed by economic conditions at 21.4%. Corruption was selected by 17.4%. Public services received 8.3%, with the remaining issues attracting smaller shares. Security therefore remains the most frequently stated priority, although a majority collectively select other concerns.

Respondents also express clear preferences about the size of political office-holding. A majority, 56.3%, want fewer government ministers, against 11.2% who want more. Support for reducing the number of MPs is stronger, at 64.0%, compared with 10.3% favouring an increase. The demand to conclude the transition includes expectations about how government should be organised.

Democratic practices and voting norms

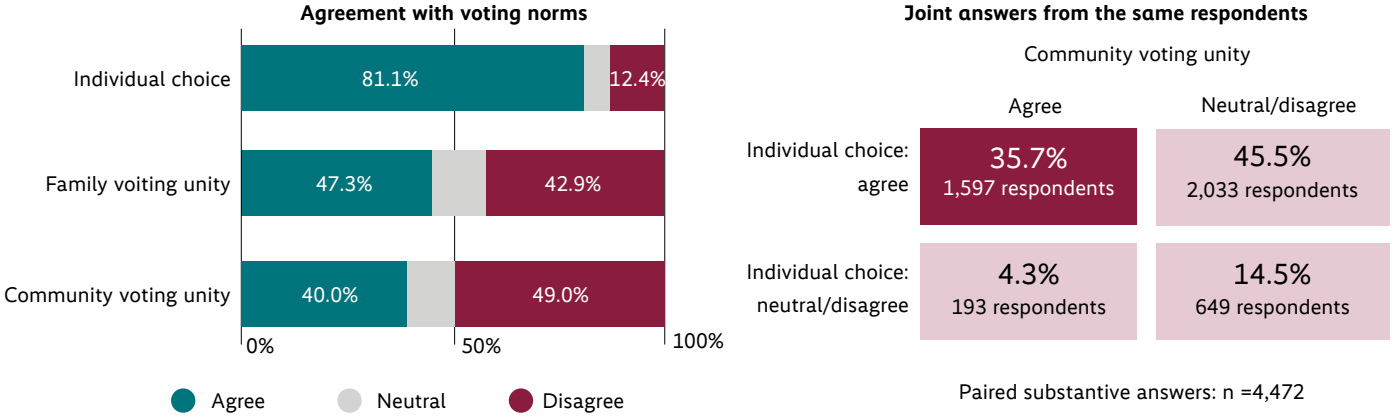
South Sudan's political life includes established practices of choosing leaders and debating their conduct. Research on everyday democracy documents elections in customary institutions and civic associations, alongside demands that representatives answer to the people they serve. These practices give substance to public expectations that elections should create opportunities to challenge those holding office.[17]

The survey records strong endorsement of individual voting choice. A large majority, 81.1%, agree that their vote is an individual decision and need not match how their family or community votes. Opinion is more divided over expectations of collective voting: 47.3% agree that all members of their family should vote the same way, while 40.0% agree that their community should do so (Figure 16).

The joint answers show how these positions coexist. Among respondents answering both relevant questions, 35.7% endorse individual voting choice and community voting unity. Nearly half, 45.5%, endorse individual choice without agreeing that their community should vote together.

Individual Voting Choice and Collective Expectations (2026)

Figure 16



Agreement combines agree/strongly agree. Joint answers show coexistence of stated norms; they do not establish coercion

Neutral/disagree in the joint panel means no agreement with that statement ; it does not imply a uniform alternative position

Note: The left panel shows agreement with individual voting choice and expectations of family or community voting unity. The right panel shows joint answers from 4,472 respondents with substantive responses to both questions. 'Neutral/disagree' combines respondents who do not endorse the relevant statement. Percentages exclude unanswered responses.

One possible interpretation is that respondents distinguish their freedom to choose from a preference for collective agreement. Families may discuss a common political interest while their members retain a sense of personal responsibility for their votes. It could also represent contradictory views people from a traditional community background have about liberal voting process. The survey leaves open how such agreements are reached and whether people feel able to dissent.

17 Kindersley, Elections in South Sudan.

Other answers also indicate expectations of accountable leadership. Two-thirds of respondents, 66.0%, select term limits for all elected positions.[18] Separately, 74.4% agree that they would vote for a political leader from another ethnic group. These are stated preferences, whose practical expression will depend on the candidates available and the conditions under which people can make their choices.

The political caution documented in Section 6 therefore exists alongside substantial expectations of democratic participation. The question for the electoral process is how much room people will have to exercise the choices they describe.

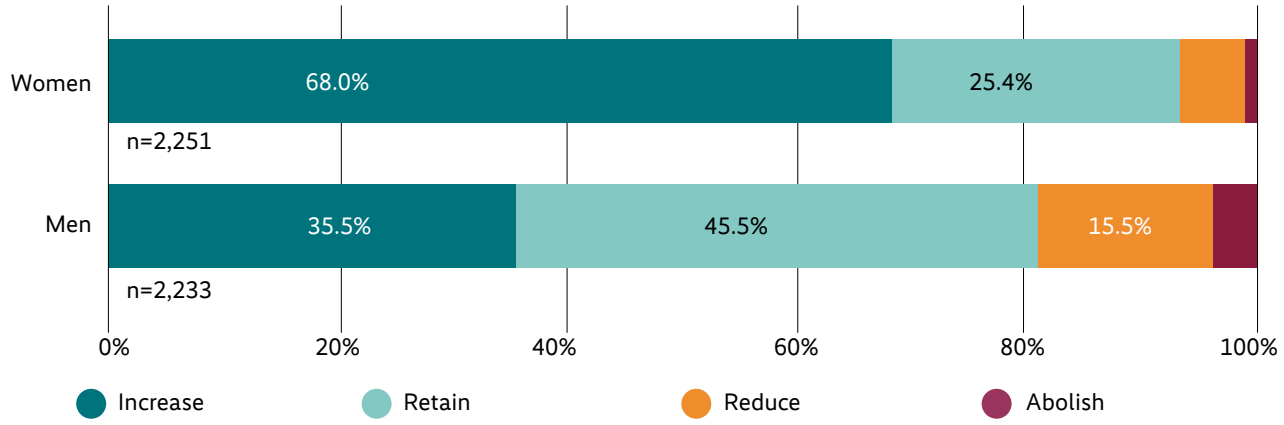
Women's representation

The future of the peace agreement's 35% quota for women reveals a substantial gender difference. Among women, 68.0% want the quota increased, compared with 35.5% of men. Men most often favour retaining the current quota, an option selected by 45.5%, compared with 25.4% of women (Figure 17).

Support for preserving at least the existing quota is broad across both groups. Increasing or retaining it is favoured by 93.4% of women and 81.1% of men. Preferences for reducing or abolishing it account for 6.6% of women's responses and 18.9% of men's.

Preferences for the 35% Women's Quota, by Gender (2026)

Figure 17



All substantive quota answers within each gender. Unanswered quota and missing gender excluded

Note: Percentages include all substantive quota responses within each gender: 2,251 women and 2,233 men. Respondents with missing gender or unanswered quota responses are excluded.

The largest division concerns expanding women's representation beyond the current provision. Most women favour an increase, while men's preferences are concentrated more heavily on retaining the existing level. An electoral settlement that preserves the quota would therefore meet the stated preference of many respondents while falling short of the expansion sought by most women surveyed.

18 The term-limits question permits multiple selections. The percentage selecting 'all elected positions' uses the 4,426 respondents choosing at least one substantive option. Each respondent selecting that option is counted once.

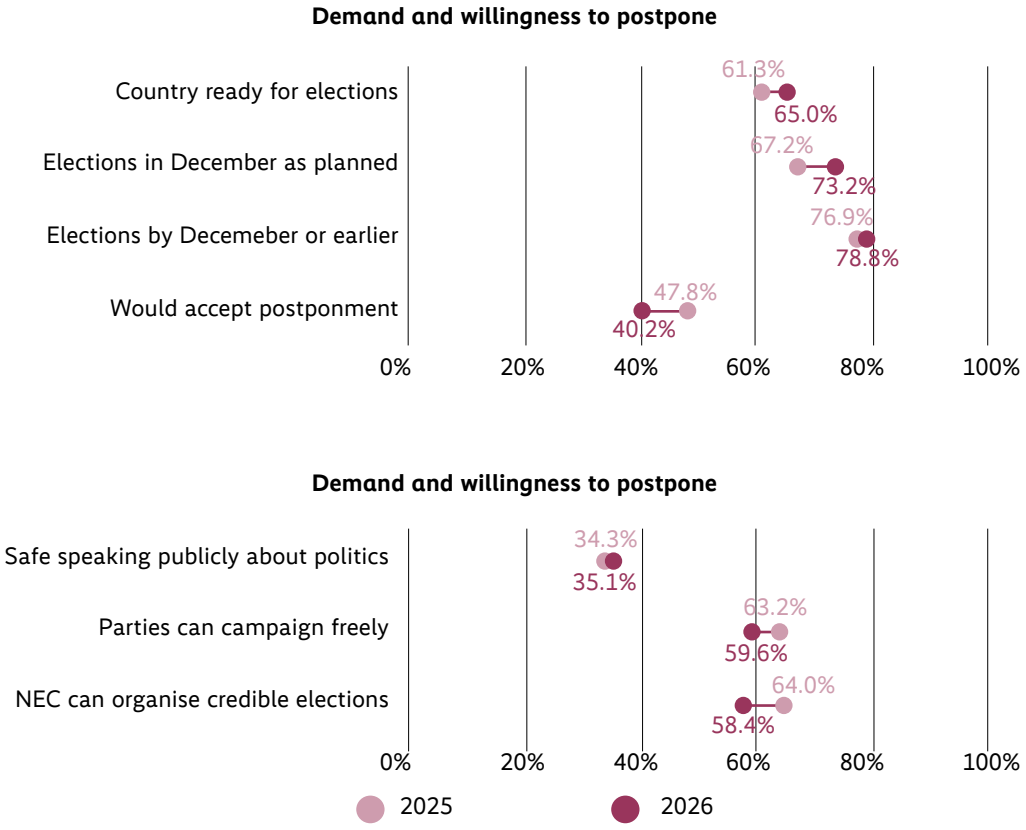
8.
Conclusion: What Could Elections Resolve?

A year after the September 2025 report described South Sudan as 'stuck'[19], public demand for elections remains strong. Most respondents want the vote to proceed by December 2026, despite deteriorating perceptions of safety. Willingness to accept another postponement has declined. Elections continue to offer a prospect of change to people who express considerable doubt about the conditions under which they would be held.

This combination is the central tension identified by the report. While support for elections on the scheduled date rose, confidence in the NEC fell. Confidence in campaign freedom also declined (Figure 18). Greater support for the timetable has emerged alongside weaker confidence in important conditions for credible competition.

Election Demand and Perceived Conditions (2025–2026)

Figure 18



Separate measures not a combined index. Valid substantive denominators; unweighted repeated survey samples

Note: The figure brings together measures presented in Sections 4 and 6. Each percentage uses substantive answers to the relevant question; neutral agreement responses remain in the denominator. Willingness to postpone is conditional on necessary conditions remaining unmet. The measures are shown separately and do not form a combined index.

19 David Deng, Sophia Dawkins, Christopher Oringa and Jan Pospisil, Trends in Civic Space and Elections in South Sudan: Findings from the 2025 Public Perceptions of Peace Survey. Juba, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and PeaceRep, 2025. https://peacerep.org/publication/trends-in-civic-space-and-elections-in-south-sudan/.

These findings give little support to treating public demand for elections as assurance that the process will be accepted as fair. Among respondents wanting elections by December, a majority expect fraud. Nearly half anticipate interference by organised forces. An election could produce a declared winner while leaving substantial disagreement over how that result was obtained.

The political-space findings make this concern more specific. Respondents identifying the governing party as offering the best vision report greater freedom to speak and substantially higher confidence in electoral administration than those choosing the main opposition party. The credibility of the process will depend partly on whether people who expect to lose believe they have a fair opportunity to compete. Independent scrutiny of electoral administration and accessible procedures for challenging results would address concerns expressed directly in the survey.

Past conflict experience presents a further difficulty. Respondents reporting family-harm are more likely to endorse the specific justification for violently contesting an election won by someone from a group associated with earlier harm. Most respondents reject that justification. This leaves scope for peaceful competition, while identifying a reason to take grievances seriously before disputes over results emerge. Clear procedures for electoral challenges would need to be credible to people whose confidence in public authorities has been shaped by conflict.

Further delay would leave respondents who continue to seek elections without the opportunity to choose their national government through a general vote. Proceeding carries its own risks when confidence in fair competition is uneven and expectations of violence remain high. National leaders and international partners face a public that wants an end to the prolonged transition while questioning the process proposed to conclude it. Whichever course is chosen, South Sudan faces substantial risks.

Elections, in theory, could clarify who has authority to govern and give citizens a means of holding that government accountable. Their contribution, however, will depend mainly on the legitimacy of the electoral process: whether rigging and intimidation can be kept in check, whether campaigning runs freely, whether opponents can challenge the result through agreed procedures and, finally, whether voters retain a practical opportunity to replace those elected when their terms end. Conducting its first general elections, in the sixteenth year of independence, will be a severe political test for South Sudan.

Trends in Civic Space and Elections in South Sudan: Findings from the Seventh Round of the Public Perceptions of Peace Survey

This report presents findings from the seventh round of the Public Perceptions of Peace Survey conducted in 2026 by Detcro, the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Raising Civil Voices programme. The survey collected views from 4,530 respondents across 15 counties in all 10 states and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). Separately surveyed displacement camps bring the number of reporting locations to 18. It examines trends in perceptions of peace and safety, demand for national elections and expectations of electoral violence. Further findings address civic and political space, political preferences and expectations of representation.

For more information visit:
↗ **https://www.fes.de/en/africa-department/south-sudan**

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