

OPINION: Barriers to Peace in South Sudan: A Crisis of Will and Unity!

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Introduction

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, was born with hope but has grown up amidst heartbreak. When independence was declared on July 9, 2011, millions danced, wept, and embraced under the rising flag of a long-awaited freedom. It was a victory not just over colonialism or Khartoum's oppression, but over hopelessness itself. The world watched in admiration as a new nation emerged from the ashes of war, determined to forge a future of peace, dignity, and self-reliance.

But now, more than a decade later, that hopeful promise has faded into a painful question:

Why has peace remained so elusive?

Why does every step forward seem to come with two steps back?

The answer is not found in a single policy or event. It lies in a **tragic convergence of factors** a web twisted from **betrayal, silence, selfishness, and squandered opportunities.**

- **Betrayal**, by those entrusted to lead but who instead fuelled division, corruption, and violence.
- **Silence**, in the face of atrocities committed against our own people, where truth has become dangerous and justice elusive.
- **Selfishness**, where personal gain triumphs over national interest, and where power is hoarded instead of shared.
- **Missed opportunities**, time and again, to reconcile, to heal, to build, and to truly listen to the cries of our people.

This is not just a political failure it is a **moral crisis**, a collapse of the values that were meant to guide our independence. South Sudan was meant to be a nation of second chances, but today it is caught in a cycle of repeated mistakes.

Peace has not been denied to us by fate it has been delayed by our own choices.

And until we choose differently until we choose unity over division, truth over propaganda, service over self-interest we will continue to drift further from the dream that birthed this nation.

1. Peace Agreements Are Treated Like Power Deals, Not People's Covenants

The so-called peace agreements whether it's the 2015 ARCISS or the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement have often been elite bargains focused more on positions and percentages than on people's suffering. Political actors see peace as a temporary ceasefire for power-sharing, not a permanent process of healing and rebuilding. ***"When peace becomes a game of who gets what ministry, and not how to reconcile communities, it loses legitimacy at the grassroots level"***.

2. Lack of Genuine Political Will

Many of our leaders speak of peace, but their actions reflect self-preservation over nation-building. There is no urgency to disarm militias, repatriate refugees, or fully operationalize the transitional justice mechanisms. As long as status quo benefits the few, peace will always be delayed. ***“You cannot sow conflict and harvest peace.” – African proverb***

3. A Politicized and Fragmented Military Undermines Peace

Instead of one national army, South Sudan has multiple armed factions loyal to individuals or regions. Unification of forces, which is a key pillar of the peace agreement, has been slow, selective, and manipulated. This military fragmentation continues to undermine security, breed mistrust, and fuel local violence. ***Peace cannot be real when everyone still holds their guns "just in case."***

4. Ethnic Chauvinism: The Thief of Our National Dream

Ethnic chauvinism has stolen the dream of a unified and peaceful South Sudan. What was once a vision of a nation rising above its colonial past is now reduced to fragmented identities and tribal loyalties. Today, many individuals see themselves first as Bari, Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Equatorian, Bahr El Ghazal or Upper Nile before they proudly declare themselves as South Sudanese. ***This shift is not accidental it is the outcome of years of politicized ethnicity, fear-based governance, and unresolved historical grievances.***

Even the highest office in the land entrusted with powers by the constitution to appoint and unite has become a tool of ethnic favoritism. Appointments into public offices, security forces, and state institutions are often driven not by merit or unity, but by tribe and loyalty. This selective favoritism undermines the very foundation of national cohesion and sow seeds of bitterness across communities.

As a result, distrust now runs deep. Political disagreements, rather than being resolved through dialogue, now easily escalate into ethnic tensions. Every policy debate, security deployment, or leadership transition risks becoming an ethnic contest, deepening our divisions and sabotaging any attempt at reconciliation.

How can we honestly speak of peace while we harbor ethnic hatred in whispers? How can we talk of nationhood while we tear each other down based on where someone comes from? Peace cannot be built on a foundation of tribal suspicion. It requires a commitment to **national identity** a shared belief that, **despite our differences, we are one people with one destiny.**

The dream of South Sudan can only be resurrected when we put the nation before the tribe, justice before revenge, and humanity before power.

5. When Speaking Truth Becomes a Crime and a Passport to the Early Grave

Peace cannot flourish in a land where **truth is treated as treason**. In South Sudan, the voices that should guide and correct the nation **activists, journalists, religious leaders, and community elders** are increasingly viewed as threats rather than assets. Their only crime is speaking up for

justice, demanding accountability, and exposing corruption. For this, many have paid the ultimate price.

In such an environment, **truth-telling has become a passport to the early grave**. Brave men and women who raise their voices are silenced through **intimidation, arbitrary detention, forced disappearance, or assassination**. The message is clear: **dissent is deadly**.

But this fear-driven silence is not peace it is **suppressed suffering**. When the moral backbone of society is broken, the **nation drifts into deeper darkness**. **Lies become policy, and oppression becomes governance**. The people **lose hope**, not because they have **no dreams**, but because they are not **allowed to speak them**.

We must ask: **What kind of peace excludes truth? What kind of future is built on fear?**

A society that punishes truth-tellers is not stable it is sick. And no lasting peace can emerge from such sickness. **True peace begins with honesty, and honesty cannot survive where expression is a death sentence**.

If South Sudan is to heal and move forward, it must protect its truth-tellers, not bury them. Let us honour those voices, not silence them. Let us build a nation where speaking truth is not an act of bravery but a normal right of every citizen.

6. A Wounded Nation That Refuses to Heal: The Betrayal of Justice and Reconciliation

Millions have been displaced. Thousands have been killed. Families have been torn apart. Villages have been burned. Generations have grown up in exile or in fear. Yet, despite this unimaginable pain, **no one has truly apologized, and no one has been held accountable** for the atrocities committed.

The national dialogue, which was meant to be a space for healing, truth-telling, and reconciliation, instead became a **political performance** a whispering exercise controlled by those who fear real justice. It lacked teeth, transparency, and representation. It was never meant to confront the deep wounds of this nation, only to **buy time and calm public outrage**.

Meanwhile, the **Hybrid Court of South Sudan**, promised under the peace agreement and mandated to investigate and prosecute those responsible for crimes during the conflict, remains **delayed, avoided, and stonewalled**. No meaningful steps have been taken to establish it. **Why?** Because too many fear what truth and accountability might expose.

This failure to confront the past is **not just a missed opportunity it is a betrayal of the people**. A nation cannot heal from wounds it refuses to acknowledge. **Pain buried alive always returns often more violently**.

Without truth, there can be no trust. Without justice, there can be no peace.

We cannot pretend to move forward while millions remain in pain and silence. We must break this cycle of impunity. South Sudan will not be rebuilt on **denial and deception**, but only on **truth, justice, and forgiveness**.

If we truly want peace, we must create space for victims to speak, for wrongs to be acknowledged, and for justice to be served not in revenge, but in restoration. Only then can we begin to build a country where **our children no longer inherit our hatred, but our hope.**

Final Thought

Peace in South Sudan is not blocked **by fate, destiny, or some divine curse** it is blocked by **human choices**. It is not that **peace is impossible**; it is that we have continually made decisions that sabotage it.

- **The Choice to Put Power Above People**
Too often, leaders prioritize their personal ambitions over the welfare of the people. Positions are pursued for influence, wealth, or control not for service. Entire regions suffer while a few individuals rise, not to lead with humility, but to dominate and silence. When power becomes the ultimate goal, people become tools, or worse casualties.
- **The Choice to Promote Division Over Unity**
Instead of nurturing national unity, many leaders' fuel tribalism to solidify their base of support. Communities are turned against one another for political gain. Elections, appointments, and government programs become battlegrounds of ethnic favoritism rather than tools for inclusive governance. Unity cannot survive when division is politically profitable.
- **The Choice to Reward Impunity Over Accountability**
Those who kill, loot, or incite violence are often rewarded with government posts, while victims are forgotten. The lack of justice sends a dangerous message: violence pays. When warlords become generals, and peacebuilders are silenced, we poison the soul of the nation.

Until these choices are reversed until our leaders choose:

- Nation over tribe
- Healing over hatred
- Sacrifice over self-interest

...then peace will remain a shallow word, repeated in speeches, but never realized in the daily lives of citizens.

True peace is not the mere absence of bullets. It is the presence of justice, dignity, and trust. It is schools full of children, roads safe to travel, homes built without fear of displacement. It is the ability to disagree without dying for it.

So, the time has come for all of us not just politicians, but citizens, youth, faith leaders, and community elders to rise not just as critics, but as builders. **Builders of a new South Sudan** where peace is **not a pause between wars, but a permanent way of life.**

That future is possible. But it begins with choices we make today.

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