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My Escape to America Shows the Price of Dissent in South Sudan

The President Ordered Me Abducted or Killed. This isn't the Democracy the West Bargained for in 2011.

By Peter Biar Ajak

I arrived safely in Washington Thursday after a harrowing journey from Nairobi, Kenya. I was forced into hiding after receiving word several weeks ago from senior government officials in South Sudan that President Salva Kiir had ordered the National Security Service, led by Gen. Akol Koor Kuc, either to abduct me from Kenya or murder me.

I knew this was no idle threat. Previously, I had been a political prisoner in South Sudan, convicted in a show trial for “disturbing the peace” and sentenced to two years in prison. My real offense: daring to criticize Mr. Kiir’s failed leadership. In January 2017, two other dissidents were abducted from Nairobi and murdered, leading the U.S. to impose sanctions on six South Sudanese officials.

I’m grateful to President Trump and the U.S. for providing refuge to me, my wife, and our three young children. While the South Sudanese government has always claimed it works within the bounds of the law, I disagree. My story is only one example of Mr. Kiir’s cruelty. He has never had to face the voters of independent South Sudan, working instead to build a powerful and repressive security apparatus with one mission—to keep him in power. The U.S., which has engaged in concerted diplomacy and invested more than \$12 billion in humanitarian assistance since the country’s independence in 2011, must insist on free elections. South Sudanese should vote no later than December 2021, with appropriate precautions for Covid-19 and monitoring to ensure that the vote is fair and transparent.

Mr. Kiir has led South Sudan since John Garang's 2005 death in a helicopter crash. At independence in 2011, Mr. Kiir's appointment was extended via the transitional constitution, and elections were planned for 2015. But in late 2013, a power struggle between Mr. Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar plunged the new nation into civil war. Almost 400,000 South Sudanese were killed, and another 4.3 million—about a third of the population—fled their homes due to widespread atrocities such as rape and ethnic massacres.

Mr. Kiir has repeatedly exploited the chaos to delay elections, first from 2015 to 2018, and then to 2021. They must not be delayed again.

Meanwhile, South Sudan's leaders reached a peace agreement in 2018 but failed to create a unity government until February 2020. The cease-fire is fragile, and intercommunal violence flares. The people are desperate to hold Mr. Kiir accountable for his failed leadership and to vote for new leaders who can finally secure a just and lasting peace. This requires three steps.

First, the U.S. should impose additional targeted sanctions against South Sudanese officials who have committed atrocities. Remarkably, neither Mr. Kiir nor his security chief, Gen. Kuc, has been subjected to sanctions. Sanctioning a head of state is an extraordinary step, but there is a [precedent](#)—the U.S. has maintained sanctions on another butcher, Belarus's President Alexander Lukashenko, since 2006. Mr. Kiir deserves no less. In addition, the U.S., United Nations and European Union must demand that South Sudan's neighbors, such as Uganda and Sudan, enforce the existing arms embargo. Based on evidence from satellite imagery and visits to a dozen military camps, Amnesty International [reported](#) in April that multiple armed groups are flagrantly violating the embargo.

Second, the U.S. should insist on improving peacekeeping. The U.N. Security Council needs to amend the peacekeeping mission's mandate. There are 17,000 U.N. peacekeepers in South Sudan, but to ensure voters' safety in December 2021, the U.N. should surge 5,000 more. Further, the African Union should replace the Intergovernmental Authority on Development—a group of East African countries that have indulged Mr. Kiir's despotism—as mediator.

Third, South Sudan needs a road map to presidential elections. Holding them will require a new constitution and amended electoral laws. A new and totally independent National Elections Commission must be appointed; the existing commissioners all

owe their jobs to Mr. Kiir. Election results should be reported at the county level, which would make fraud much more difficult. A national census must be conducted and the national voter registry updated. And hundreds of international election monitors need to be present to ensure the vote is fair.

When Mr. Kiir was inaugurated in 2011, the conventional wisdom was that the world needed to support him for a time before elections could be held. Nine years later, the South Sudanese people haven't voted. The promised "capacity" has never been built. True democratic institutions don't exist. South Sudan is still waiting for its independence—this time from a ruthless, unelected and corrupt elite in Juba, not Khartoum.

If nothing changes, the world will have squandered billions of dollars to create another African failed state led by a brutal dictator. But if the people of South Sudan can exercise their rights and elect their own president, their dreams for peace, development, human rights and a real democracy may finally come true.

Mr. Ajak, an economist, is chairman of the South Sudan Young Leaders Forum.