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## South Sudan Deserves Better Than Salva Kiir

By Peter Biar Ajak

Last Saturday, African leaders gathered in South Sudan's capital, Juba, to witness the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement, which promises to end decades of conflict in Sudan's restive Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile regions. The agreement, [brokered](#) by South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, is yet another milestone in Sudan's gradual transition to peace and democracy. And while Kiir deserves commendation for his successful mediation in Sudan's conflict, his own management of South Sudan has been disastrous. Just last month, the Social Progress Imperative ranked South Sudan dead last on its 2020 [Social Progress Index](#), at 163 out of 163. This is only an indication of how quality of life has deteriorated in the world's youngest nation under Kiir's leadership.

South Sudan cannot address its enormous challenges and thrive with Kiir in charge. Any hope for a better future lies with finding a rapid path to credible elections, which will finally allow the South Sudanese people to vote for leaders of their choice.

South Sudan's story is a tragic one. Its people fought decades of civil war against regimes in Khartoum that wanted to impose Islam and Arab culture on them. The war claimed the lives of some [2.5 million people](#). But a new dawn broke in 2005 when, thanks to years of intense U.S. diplomacy, Sudan's government was pressured into a peace deal that granted Southern Sudan autonomy and a right to secession under an internationally supervised referendum. And it was this referendum that resulted in the birth of South Sudan on July 9, 2011, which was joyously celebrated. Since then, the United States has invested more [than \\$11 billion in assistance](#), but has had little to show for it.

Kiir assumed the presidency by appointment, charged with building democratic institutions that would allow for national elections to be held in 2015. In 2013, he

and his former vice president Riek Machar plunged the nascent country into a new civil war. Horrific crimes against humanity, including tribal massacres and widespread rapes were committed, and [nearly 400,000 lives were lost](#). The scheduled elections were [deferred to 2018, and again to 2021](#).

Kiir and Machar finally reached a peace agreement in September 2018, after a 2016 agreement failed, but implementation didn't begin until February 2020, with elections deferred again until 2022. Already, this agreement is faltering, as Kiir has shown little interest in its implementation. Although it brought many of the warring factions back to Juba, Kiir's unwillingness to deliver on the specific commitments within it — the merging of warring militias into a national army, the reconstitution of the parliament and the establishment of sub-regional governments — has created great risks of a new conflict emerging.

Meanwhile, intercommunal violence [flares](#) in many parts of the country. The economy is on its knees, decimated by the [fall of oil prices](#) and the insatiable [corruption](#) of Kiir and his cronies. In August, the deputy governor of the Bank of South Sudan [said](#) the central bank was out of foreign exchanges. As [reported](#) by Human Rights Watch, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention and torture have become commonplace as the National Security Service — the country's intelligence agency, which functions as a private army personally loyal to Kiir — terrorizes the population in Juba and other towns.

What then should be done? The only viable option lies in exerting pressure for the timely implementation of the peace deal with elections taking place by March 2022. This requires specific tasks be front-loaded, such as the conducting of the census, the promulgation of a new constitution, the appointment of independent elections commissioners and the updating of the voter registry. If Kiir remains unwilling to make progress on these vital areas, and that date comes without elections, then the thinking should shift to consideration of the Liberian model under which that country's then-dictator, [Charles Taylor](#), was forced to step down to allow a genuine transitional government to shepherd the country toward the holding of democratic elections.

Kiir is already arguing that elections should be [deferred to 2023](#) due to the delays in forming the unity government. Yet, the procedures amending the agreement couldn't be clearer. Not only would an amendment require the endorsement of the unity cabinet and other institutions created to oversee the agreement, but it would also require the approval of a two-thirds majority of the yet-to-be established Transitional National Legislature. Kiir and Machar may well establish the

legislature and seek to amend the agreement, but such a move should be rejected outright. If the international community acquiesces to a fourth deferral of elections, it would crush the hopes of the South Sudanese people, who will conclude the promise of the independence referendum to finally give them their own democratic state was just a cruel illusion.

South Sudan cannot improve the quality of life for its people with Kiir in power. He knows that the South Sudanese people will never reelect him in free, fair and credible elections. He sees conflict, endless negotiations to nowhere and severe repression as the only way of maintaining his grip on power. But if the people can finally vote, they will undoubtedly send him home and elect visionary leaders who will rebuild South Sudan and restore enduring peace, development and human rights for all its people.

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