

# PANDEMIC CLEAVAGES

## COVID-19 AND THE SOUTH SUDANESE PEACE PROCESS

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by Jan Pospisil

Roughly 15 months into the Covid-19 pandemic, it now becomes possible to analyse the impact the pandemic shock had on peace processes globally and assess its mid- and long-term consequences. This briefing investigates the case study of South Sudan, where the pandemic correlated with a significant upsurge in violence at the sub-national level. The briefing follows up on an expert perception survey on the impact of Covid-19 on peace processes, conducted by the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) in May 2020. The survey generated 18 responses from South Sudan on 20 questions related to the impact of the pandemic. This briefing further incorporates findings from a population perception survey by the Institute of Social Policy and Research from November 2020<sup>1</sup> and a series of expert interviews with stakeholders and observers of the South Sudanese peace process conducted in Juba from March to May 2021.

The primary outcome of the May 2020 expert survey, whereby it was assessed that the pandemic would not have a structural impact on the South Sudanese peace process but would aggravate existing trends, can be confirmed one year later. The case study of the South Sudanese peace process supports the global trend of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has not been causing structural change but accelerating and catalysing pre-existing pathways. In the case of South Sudan, this

pathway is the elite politics of delaying the peace process. This strategic delay is happening alongside the localisation of the violent competition for power, the failure to compromise between all major parties, and the strategic side-lining of multilateral and international actors.

#### Where the Peace Process Stood and Stands

In February 2020, South Sudan entered a transitional period, subject to the stipulations of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The transitional period should last 36 months and culminate in the holding of general elections. Precisely when this should happen is subject to debate. After a significant delay in the pre-transitional period, which was meant to last eight months but, in fact, took twice that time, elections are now tentatively foreseen for February 2023. Before this is to happen, the transitional government, consisting of the ruling Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the SPLM In Opposition (SPLM-IO), and two other groups, are tasked to implement a substantial transformational programme. Required efforts include establishing joint security arrangements, the graduation of so-called 'Necessary Unified Forces', the development of a new constitution, and conducting a census, which is,

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<sup>1</sup> Malish John Peter, 2020, 'Covid-19 and Fragile Peace Process in South Sudan', Juba, 30 November 2020.

among other procedural necessities, a precondition for holding elections.

Even before Covid-19 hit the region, the process was substantially delayed. The formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity, R-TGoNU, was agreed upon in February 2020, much more than half a year after it was due to happen. The cantonment process of the armed forces is now lagging far behind schedule, as is the constitutional process. State and county governments were not reappointed until June 2020. In parallel to increasing political tensions and a continuation of the armed conflict with hold-out groups, in particular, the National Salvation Front (NAS) led by Thomas Cirillo in the Equatoria region, South Sudan has seen a significant rise in armed violence at the subnational level due to land- and migration-related disputes, inter-communal tensions, and cattle raiding.

### **Covid-19 and the Pandemic Response in South Sudan**

South Sudan's response to the Covid-19-pandemic was mixed. At first, in March 2020, the country was hit by the global shutdown. Most internationals left the country, a lockdown was declared, and public gatherings and meetings prohibited. These measures resulted in most governance functions de facto being stalled, which, in turn, led to even more centralisation of political decision-making in an already highly centralised and authoritarian political system. After international travel resumed, the newly installed 'Covid Task Force', responsible for coordinating South Sudan's pandemic response, took effective control of visa approvals. Not necessarily as a result of bad will, the task force became the bottleneck of the visa process, which resulted in severe delays of several months even for essential international staff and peacekeeping personnel.

While the strict travel policy remained in place, the lockdown was lifted, and, apart from the schools continuing to be closed to students, life returned almost back to normal in the second half of 2020. Eventually, the requirement of task force approval for visas was also lifted, paradoxically right before the second wave of the pandemic hit the country in

January and February 2021. Again, a lockdown was declared, although, this time, taken less seriously. The second wave was heavier than the first, with official positivity rates of PCR tests above 25 per cent at its peak. Despite the only leisurely enforced lockdown, cases dropped significantly from March, and the lockdown was finally lifted in April 2021.

An overall assessment is impossible given the low rate of Covid-19 testing and stigmatisation of the disease. For instance, infected people with symptoms would often declare the condition to be malaria to avoid testing and the socially challenging side-effects of contact tracing. However, South Sudan was arguably less hard-hit compared to its neighbouring countries and certainly compared with Europe or the United States. Given that a fair number of cases occurred within the political and economic elites and the higher middle-class and among expatriates, it is reasonable to assume that the lower degree of affection results from everyday life happening predominantly outside, thus lowering the transmission risk.

While not significantly influencing the national mode of politics and policymaking, the practices of the international community were heavily affected by Covid-19 and the pandemic response. Effects especially hit in four ways: (1) travel restrictions, both those set by the South Sudanese authorities and those set by international organisations and NGOs themselves, led to a significant reduction of travel and, thus, to a severe reduction of the number of international staff present in the country; (2) as a further consequence, even staff present remained confined mainly in offices or even to work-at-home situations in the capital city, Juba. Field visits were mostly suspended, and, apart from project implementors, only a tightly limited number of international staff moved within the country; (3) in-person meetings were mostly suspended and substituted by online meetings. The new culture of online meetings resulted in the paradoxical situation that the frequency of meetings increased while personal contact decreased, especially between national and international staff.

Finally, (4), the pandemic response resulted in a responsibility gap that dragged the international community within South Sudan even further away

from the everyday life experiences of regular South Sudanese: mask-wearing has become one peculiar, since clearly visible distinction. Strict curfews have prevented UN and INGO staff from leaving their compounds and engaging in the ongoing everyday life in South Sudan without a formal approval process. In combination with the usually short deployment rhythms of international staff, these restrictions have produced a whole generation of international staff working in South Sudan that has never actually been to and lived meaningfully in the country.

### Initial Perceptions

When the PSRP conducted its quick response expert online survey in May 2020 on the initial impact of the pandemic on the South Sudanese peace process, one message was almost unanimous: the pandemic would not substantially transform the peace process. Nevertheless, it would likely affect it negatively. Notably, the responses showed three trends:

First, there was a widely held expectation that the government – i.e., the president – would use the pandemic to continue what Alex de Waal and colleagues have called the ‘politics of delay’. The failure to nominate state and county governments in time while, at the same time, de facto suspending the supervisory bodies of the peace process were seen as indicators of this attempt. For instance, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission, R-JMEC, did not meet for months.

Second, there was a substantial increase in subnational violence that respondents pointed to, although without establishing a causal link with the pandemic. Follow-up interviews point towards the lack of international supervision and conflict management support in the first months after the pandemic hit. The missing government structures at the subnational level due to the postponed appointment are possible contributing factors.

Third, a significant change in the relationship between the international community and South Sudan/ese was expected: on the one hand, respondents projected a substantial decrease in peacebuilding funding and, on the other hand, an increase in xenophobia due to

visible signs of Covid-19 being perceived as a ‘foreign disease’ or, at least, as a disease of foreigners.

### Long-term Consequences

More than a year later, it is possible to revisit these expectations. Xenophobia did not rise, not least because the South Sudanese themselves have taken a relatively relaxed approach towards the disease. Even most national staff in international NGOs have rejected AstraZeneca vaccinations since they perceive it as potentially more harmful than the disease itself. Consequently, South Sudan had to donate 120,000 vaccinations that it had received through the Covax initiative to Kenya on short notice to prevent them from expiring. With this prevalent relaxed approach, disease-related prejudices towards foreigners did not take a firm hold.

Other expectations, however, have been proven correct. The prospects for the peace process have remained stable, while the level of violence in most parts of the country has increased. Both aspects are only marginally related to the disease, whose impact was mainly to provide yet another tool for political tactics. South Sudan confirms a broader trend whereby the pandemic results in sudden turbulence that catalyses and accelerates existing tendencies.

The utilisation of the pandemic as a tool for political tactics is the first mid-term consequence that can be assessed after 15 months of Covid-19. Visa processes were slowed down, and the suspension of mass gatherings was used to postpone the final stage of the ongoing national dialogue as well as the meetings of the SPLM-IO. The latter, in turn, delayed the appointments of state and county governments, for which agreed lists of all signatories to the peace agreement had been a requirement. Political rallies and travel by politicians were prohibited, which hampered political consultation and mobilisation, predominantly hitting the political opposition. Yet none of these developments was caused by the disease or by the attempt to prevent it effectively. For instance, it was not a problem for president Salva Kiir to hold a mass gathering in Bor during the second lockdown. He saw this gathering as necessary after a harsh critique of his leadership style and the failure to deliver

tangible governance by Kuol Manyang, a senior politician from the region.

Second, the hitherto already wide gap between South Sudanese and the international staff working in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sector, has increased even further. It has reached a concerning level. In this respect, international actors should reconsider their approach. Not engaging personally with the people they are supposedly working for is a severe shortcoming and contradicts the fundamentals of a conflict-sensitive approach. The measures to prevent the spread of the disease have reinforced already existing '*peaceland*' structures in UN agencies and international NGOs.

Fortunately, some agencies were adaptive and adjusted their approach in the second half of 2020, before the second lockdown was imposed. UN agencies, in general, showed more flexibility compared with INGOs. An informal slogan, 'don't let Covid-19 ever be an excuse to do what is still possible', captures this increased risk tolerance. INGOs often took a more cautious approach, arguing with the

safety of their counterparts. Given the availability of vaccinations and other new adaptation techniques, such as rapid self-tests, such an approach needs thorough adjustment.

There is a substantial risk that Covid-19-precautions add another layer to staff safety protocols already widely exaggerated before the pandemic. While higher-risk field jobs are conducted by national staff under partially high-risk conditions, international staff are mostly confined under tight curfew and movement rules in the capital city, Juba. This discrepancy has created far too wide a gap over the last decade. Covid-19 could provide an opportunity not to tighten existing safety protocols further but to ask fundamental questions about the balance between the will to engage and the risk appetite required to do so. In South Sudan, this balance has been lost. The ongoing lifting of Covid-19 prevention measures should be used to revisit it.

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