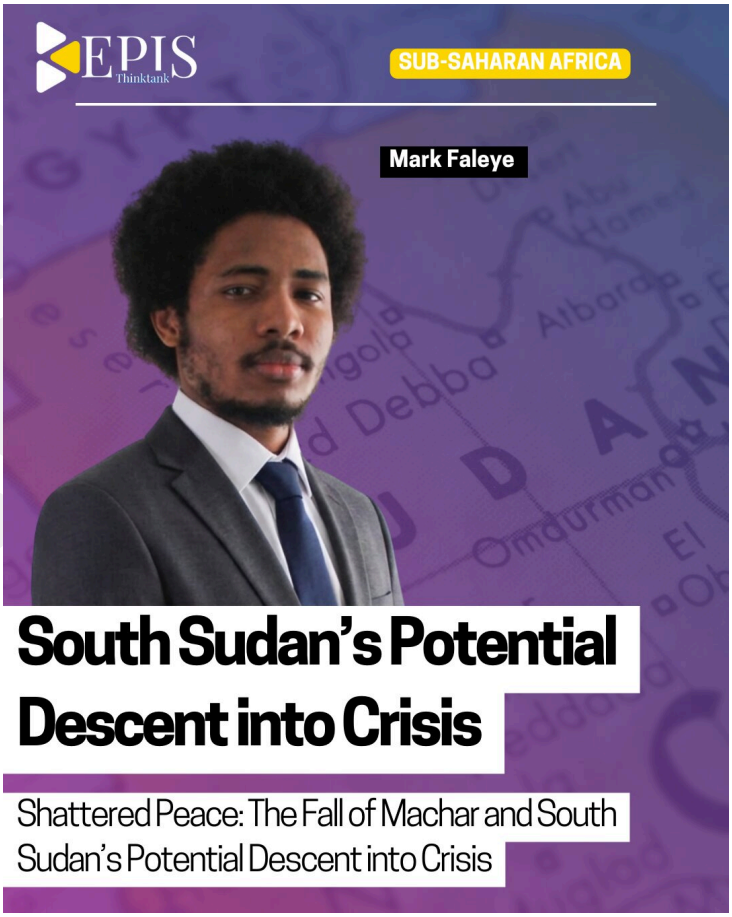
South Sudan's Potential Descent into Crisis

28 FEBRUARY 2026

Mark Faleye



1. Introduction

South Sudan faces renewed threat of war as First Vice President's dismissal shatters fragile peace treaty and ethnic power-sharing. The peace accord signed in 2018 by President Kiir and his long-time political rival, Riek Machar, ended the South Sudanese civil war and is supposed to ensure peace and stability in the world's youngest nation. As of February 2026, Riek Machar remains suspended from office and in detention, a situation that has led the African Union and regional leaders to demand his uncon-

ditional release to prevent the total collapse of the 2018 peace agreement, yet these external African authorities miss the mark on the fundamental problem as well as the structural shift underway. The current crisis in South Sudan, sparked by the suspension and trial of Riek Machar, represents the definitive collapse of a peace model built on fragile ethnic equilibrium. This breakdown reveals that South Sudan's stability is undermined by historic ethnic grievances, but also by a rentier economic system that incentivizes leadership to use identity-based violence as a tool for succession and the preservation of power

This brief puts South Sudan's political history into context as it examines the failure of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS).

2. The Recurring Rivalry between Kiir and Machar

Riek Machar was first removed from office by president Salva Kiir Mayardit in 2013, after accusation of plotting a coup along with several ex-cabinet ministers and officials including Madame Rebecca Nyanding de Mabior, the widow of the ruling party's (SPLM) first leader, John Garang. Machar had publicly stated his intentions to challenge President Kiir in February of that year, and was removed by July along with all the ministers with the official excuse of reducing the size of government.

This attempt at peace has however come undone, with the suspension of Riek Machar on September 11, 2025 and subsequent charge to court on allegations put forward by the Kiir led government, that Machar and a few other associates were responsible for attacks on a military base that occurred in March 2025, killing more than 250 soldiers. The government has therefore accused Machar and others of terrorism, treason and crimes against humanity.

He has been placed under house arrest since March 2025, and this has been viewed by his supporters as a ploy by the government to establish authoritarian rule and one-ethnic rule over the whole South Sudan. Based on historical precedence this could cause the outbreak of another full-blown civil war.

3. The Long Shadow of the SPLA Split: Tracing Today's Crisis to its 1991 Roots

To understand the whole situation let's take a look at the history of South Sudan politics. Salva Kiir Mayardit has been the president of South Sudan since independence from Sudan in 2011, as no elections have taken place. He is of the Dinka ethnicity, while Riek Machar is from the Nuer ethnic group. The conflict in South Sudan has been popularly framed as an ethnic power struggle between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups, despite the fact that members of both ethnic groups jointly championed the cause for an independent South Sudan. The South Sudanese had voted overwhelmingly

in favour of their independence from Sudan in January 2011, with 98.83% of voters reportedly preferring to split from the North. On 9 July 2011, South Sudan became an independent state, with Kiir as its first president. The independence struggle traces to the armed conflicts associated with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) of which Kiir was a leading figure.

John Garang was one of the major influences on the movement that led to the foundation of South Sudan's independence from the rule of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir. He was also of Dinka ethnicity. Dying in 2005 as the president of the Southern Sudan autonomous region, left his vice Kiir as his successor.

There has been an internal debate about party direction at least since the death of John Garang in 2005. But internal issues within the party and the South Sudanese struggle has persisted since even before Garang's death. It should also be noted that the motivation for the struggle for Southern Sudanese independence had much to do with the fact that much of the former Sudan's oil wealth laid in the south of the country, which South Sudan now has control over.

Leadership misunderstandings between Garang and senior SPLA commanders, Riek Machar and Lam Akol in August 1991. The splinter group led by Machar and Akol was named the SPLA-Nasir. This led to the Dinka Massacre which enraged civilians and exposed the deep ethnic divides within the SPLA. The Southern Sudanese communities became more divided, with the Nasir faction mainly composed of Nuer, and Garang's supporters mainly Dinka people. This is why many view the ethnic equilibrium of a Dinka as president and a Nuer as vice president as an important safeguard to preserve stability.

South Sudan was built on a shaky foundation, and as the early independence euphoria died down, the cracks started to show. Recall the Bor massacre of over 5,000 civilians in Bor on November 15, 1991 during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983 to 2005). And the about 20,000 civilians in the famine caused by the war. The massacre was carried out mostly by Nuer fighters from SPLA-Nasir, led by Riek Machar, shortly after Machar split off from the SPLA led by John Garang.

Another massacre associated with Machar is the Bentiu Massacre on April 15, 2014. The UN described this as a "targeted killing of civilians based on their ethnic origins and nationality." The mainly Nuer rebels reportedly killed non-Nuers, and Nuers perceived not to support them. All of this has led to bitter bad blood and made it easy to stoke ethnic sentiments against the Nuer.

But these ethnic based killings have not been entirely one-sided. Between December 27 and January 12, 2014, a Human Rights Watch research team in South Sudan interviewed more than 200 victims and witnesses to abuses in Juba and Bor. Researchers documented widespread killings of Nuer men by members of South Sudanese armed forces in Juba, especially between December 15 and 19, including a massacre of between 200 and 300

men in the Gudele neighborhood on December 16. These Researchers also documented the targeting and killing of civilians of Dinka ethnicity by opposition forces in other parts of the country. These killings and rights abuses have been happening since the break out of the South Sudanese Civil War (2013 to 2018) between government and SPLM-IO opposition forces.

Before Independence, John Garang had led the struggle and on July 9, 2005 and was sworn in as the First-Vice-President – the second most powerful person in the former Sudan.

This power-sharing principle followed them into the independent South Sudan state, reason why the suspension, house arrest and trial of a Nuer vice president like Machar could have consequences.

At the first removal of Machar in 2013, he said that Kiir's move was a step towards dictatorship and continued to maintain that he would challenge Salva Kiir for the presidency. These events in turn led to the South Sudanese Civil War.

That same 2013 an attempted coup d'état was put down. Intermittent fighting then continued amid ceasefire breakdowns during the ensuing civil war and international concern grew over more than 1,000 deaths, a humanitarian catastrophe of over a million refugees, and man-made famine.

4. The Shattered Peace

There are legitimate fears that South Sudan could plunge into another full-blown civil war as intense fighting is already happening in Jonglei state, north-east of the capital, Juba.

With Machar currently on trial in Juba, on charges of murder, treason and crimes against humanity, this recent violence again have been described by the government as implicating for Machar.

Machar denies any involvement, as he denies the very charges put forward against him, his party, the SPLM-IO has also described the charges as a political witch hunt. The recent fighting in Jonglei is said to have already forced 280,000 people to flee their homes.

The peace that has been enjoyed since the 2018 peace deal has therefore been shattered. Although already before the march 2025 incident where the White Army militia allied to Machar, attacked a military base, there has already been displeasure concerning the implementation of some key parts of the peace deal, such as the integration of rebel soldiers into the national army.

Another aspect of the break down of peace is the issue of change, a generational shift moved by individuals who did not participate in the liberation struggle, but are ready to exert themselves. A good example is Benjamin Bol Mel who served as 2nd Vice President between February 10, 2025 to November 12, 2025. The current tensions therefore reveal a deeper shift, in that the key question for South Sudan is not how to save the Revitalized Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), but of succession and what is to be expected

with the arrival of a new political generation, away from the old guard of men now in their seventies.

This is also reason why whether the allegations against Macher and the others are true or not, there is little doubt that the violent crisis in Nasir was used by parts of the government to create a convenient political crisis with the aim of "replacing Macher who represents a significant liability—both as a potential power rival and as a symbol of past betrayals."

Across the African continent, another round of fighting is not desired, as the AU and many African states have officially urged for peace, like Nigeria that has called for the immediate and unconditional release of Machar and other key opposition figures.

It is very evident that South Sudan needs peace for the South Sudanese people to actually start feeling a benefit of the independence they fought for, as the country continues to suffer a lack of infrastructure despite its oil exports.

5. Conclusion

The conflict in South Sudan now is mainly due to the rift between the president Salva Kiir and the first vice president Macher, despite a 2018 peace deal. The South Sudanese conflict, while initially triggered by President Kiir's political maneuvering and subsequent coup allegations, has been profoundly deepened by the deliberate instrumentalization of Dinka and Nuer ethnic identities. This shift from a leadership dispute to a communal war is underpinned by a rentier economic model where oil wealth replaces the need for a tax-based social contract. Because the government is funded by extractive resource driven external rents rather than its people, it has consistently failed to invest in the public goods or institutional frameworks necessary to foster industry and a unified national identity, leaving the state vulnerable to fragmented, identity-based violence.

As South Sudan stands at this crossroads, the focus has shifted from maintaining a fragile "peace on paper" to an aggressive reorganization of power. Whether through the rise of a new generation or the forced removal of the old guard.