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Fifteen Years of Independence: A Captured State, a Betrayed Promise and the Responsibility to Reclaim It

Commemoration

In commemoration of the fifteenth anniversary of our country's independence, the People's Coalition for Civil Action (PCCA) wishes the people of South Sudan a meaningful and reflective commemoration. On this day, we remember, salute, and honor the generations of youth, veterans, martyrs, mothers, and entire communities who gave their lives, livelihoods, and futures so that South Sudan could stand as an independent, sovereign state. We cherish this monumental achievement together with our people, and there is nothing on this earth worth more than our independence. Fifteen years ago today, on July 9, 2011, the Republic of South Sudan was born through decades of selfless sacrifice and an unyielding pursuit of one transformative vision: a just, democratic, and prosperous state where every citizen is a first-class citizen, and where government answers to the governed.

Our struggle against successive regimes in Khartoum was never a struggle against Arabs as a people. It was a struggle against injustice, against the imposition of state religion, and against a system of governance that concentrated power in the hands of a privileged few. It was a struggle against dictatorship, political exclusion, and a state that marginalized our people. It was also a struggle against underdevelopment and the systematic neglect of our communities. We paid the ultimate price — more than four million lives — to free ourselves from the yoke of dictatorship, marginalization, and oppression. In doing so, we made a solemn promise to ourselves: that no generation of South Sudanese, born or yet to be born, would ever again endure such subjugation.

The promise of 2011 was that independence would break the cycles of violence, exclusion, and authoritarianism that had defined our past. It was the promise that our new republic would be founded on freedom, justice, dignity, and shared prosperity. That promise became our inheritance, our collective responsibility, and the guiding compass for building the South Sudan we fought so hard to create.

The Struggle Betrayed

Fifteen years later, we must confront a painful truth: independence has not delivered the state our people fought and sacrificed for. Instead, it has produced a sovereign flag over a captured state — a state in which political power is exercised not to serve citizens, but to distribute access to public offices, resources, and patronage among a narrow circle of political and military elites. It is a state that increasingly resembles, and in some respects surpasses, the system we fought against in Khartoum. Institutions that were meant to uphold the rule of law, provide public services, and hold leaders accountable have instead been hollowed out or transformed into instruments that sustain elite power.

Rather than becoming a democracy in which political leaders compete through ideas, policies, and public service, South Sudan has become an arena where political power is contested through violence, with rival

elites mobilizing private militias to capture and control the state and its resources. In the process of vying for state control, the politico-military class has destroyed our communities, torn apart the social fabric, and preyed upon the very people they claimed to liberate. This is the deepest form of political betrayal. It is not merely a betrayal of the South Sudanese people; it is a betrayal of the ideals, sacrifices, and aspirations that defined our long liberation struggle.

What Must Be Done to Redeem Betrayed Aspirations

The responsibility to redeem our betrayed aspirations now falls, as it has before, to the people of South Sudan. The liberation struggle was ultimately won because ordinary citizens refused to surrender their hope for freedom and dignity. The task before us today is no less important. Reclaiming the vision for which so many sacrificed demands renewed civic engagement, principled leadership, and a new social contract between the state and its citizens. It also requires an honest reckoning with what has gone wrong, why it has gone wrong, and what must fundamentally change if our republic is to fulfil the promise of independence.

On the eve of the tenth anniversary of our independence in 2021, the PCCA declared that the first ten years of our independence had been a **lost decade** — lost to failed leadership, the absence of a national vision, recurring violent conflict, deepening social fragmentation, and the systematic erosion of public institutions. The PCCA therefore calls upon the people of South Sudan to embrace the following national priorities:

1. **The people of South Sudan must reclaim ownership of their country's destiny.** The future of our republic cannot remain indefinitely in the hands of a small clique that has captured the state, betrayed the aspirations of our independence, and denied our people the freedom, justice, and prosperity for which generations struggled. For fifteen years, a narrow circle of leaders, drawn largely from the liberation struggle and their political and business allies, has monopolized political power to the exclusion of the broader citizenry, reproducing the same politics of exclusion, domination, and elite privilege that defined the successive Khartoum-based regimes against which our liberation struggle was waged. It is time for South Sudanese to exercise their constitutional rights and peacefully demand a system of governance that reflects the vision, values, and sacrifices of the independence struggle. This requires unity across ethnic, political, regional, religious, generational, and gender divides — one people, united in pursuit of one national destiny.
2. **Name the failure and stop pretending otherwise.** The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has been systematically undermined and has failed to deliver the transition it promised. Nine years of selective implementation, repeated extensions and renegotiations, missed deadlines, and the reversal of its limited gains — including delays in the unification of forces, constitutional and judicial reforms, and preparations for credible elections — demonstrate that the agreement can no longer serve as a viable framework for democratic transition. Continuing to invoke the R-ARCSS as the sole pathway forward merely prolongs an indefinite transition and shields those who benefit from the status quo from accountability.
3. **Convene an inclusive, internationally mediated national political dialogue.** The PCCA joins the overwhelming majority of South Sudanese stakeholders in calling for an inclusive, internationally mediated national political dialogue to reset the political foundations of the South Sudanese state. The process should bring together political parties, civil society organizations, faith leaders, traditional authorities, women, youth, professional groups, and the diaspora to negotiate a new, nationally owned, and binding transitional roadmap with a clear and enforceable timetable for adopting a permanent constitution and conducting credible elections. The African Union's mandate to former President Jakaya Kikwete presents a timely opportunity to launch such a

process. All South Sudanese should engage with it in good faith, with a spirit of compromise, and with an unwavering commitment to the national interest.

4. **Reclaim civic and political space and defend fundamental freedoms.** Freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of the press, and the right to peaceful protest are constitutional rights — not privileges to be granted, licensed, or withdrawn by the government. Freedom that depends on official permission ceases to be freedom. South Sudanese must therefore defend these rights peacefully, legally, and collectively: challenging unlawful restrictions before the courts, speaking out and protesting peacefully when expression is suppressed, and standing in solidarity with journalists who are intimidated or prevented from informing the public and holding power to account. We must insist that the Constitution — not the arbitrary will of those in power — governs our public life. This is how civic space is protected: not through violence, but through the courageous and persistent exercise of our constitutional rights.
5. **Convert international goodwill into conditional support.** Regional and international partners must align their political, diplomatic, financial, and technical assistance with clear and enforceable benchmarks on democratic governance, human rights, accountability, constitutional reform, and an inclusive political transition. International support should strengthen the aspirations of the South Sudanese people — not prolong an indefinite transition or sustain political arrangements that have exhausted their legitimacy. Assistance must reinforce national ownership, constitutional government, and measurable progress toward peace, democracy, and accountable governance.

Conclusion

The fifteen years of independence we commemorate today are both a milestone and a moment of reckoning. Political independence was never the destination; it was the beginning of a larger journey toward freedom, justice, democracy, and shared prosperity. Sovereignty means little if it does not protect the dignity of every citizen, uphold the rule of law, and create the conditions for South Sudanese to live in peace, security, and justice. We must have the courage to acknowledge what has failed.

The people of South Sudan should no longer be asked to believe that the R-ARCSS can still deliver the transition it promised. Nine years of selective implementation, repeated extensions, and deliberate obstruction have exhausted that possibility. Continuing to pretend otherwise only prolongs national suffering and delays the difficult but necessary decisions required to move the country forward.

The path ahead is clear! South Sudan needs an inclusive, nationally owned, and internationally supported political dialogue to forge a new constitutional and political settlement — a republic founded not on the interests of competing elites but on the sovereignty of its citizens; not on fear and violence but on law, accountability, and democratic consent.

We therefore call upon all South Sudanese — citizens, political leaders, civil society, faith communities, women, youth, the diaspora — and our regional and international partners, to unite behind this historic task. Let us reject despair, reject division, and reject the politics of violence. Let us reclaim the promise of our independence and complete the work for which generations sacrificed.

Independence gave us a flag. Only a state that serves its people can give us a country. The responsibility to build that state now rests with us.

The People of South Sudan Shall Prevail!