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20 Years of Autocracy: Democracy at Election Time Is Hypocrisy

The Office of the President's press statement of 23 August 2026 warrants a clear and substantive response. The People's Coalition for Civil Action (PCCA) has reviewed the statement's claims on the December elections, political accountability, popular sovereignty, and the liberation legacy. These are matters of profound national importance and deserve serious public scrutiny. Yet rather than confronting the political, constitutional, and institutional conditions necessary for a credible democratic transition, the statement reduces South Sudan's deep national crisis to a false and misleading choice: either support the proposed elections as presented or be cast as opposed to democracy. That framing is both intellectually weak and politically dangerous.

The PCCA and the people of South Sudan support elections. The fact that the country has yet to hold its first national elections since independence is itself an indictment of the leadership that has governed for more than two decades. That record speaks more loudly than press statements now claiming the democratic high ground. The longstanding demand of South Sudanese for genuine elections must not be confused with a hurried electoral campaign designed to manufacture political legitimacy. The distinction is fundamental: supporting elections does not mean accepting any electoral process regardless of the conditions under which it is conducted. Democracy is not achieved by announcing a date or placing ballot boxes before citizens. Elections derive their legitimacy from the political, constitutional, security, and institutional conditions that allow citizens to make a genuinely free, informed, and credible choice.

The Office of the President therefore asks the wrong question when it challenges critics to explain why they once demanded elections but now question the December process. There is no contradiction. South Sudanese have consistently demanded credible elections, but not elections at any cost. The real question is whether the political and institutional conditions presently exist for elections to be free, fair, competitive, peaceful, and broadly accepted. When senior opposition leaders are detained on charges widely viewed as politically motivated, another Vice President faces restrictions on movement, and ordinary citizens encounter severe constraints on basic political association and public assembly, confidence in the integrity of an electoral process is inevitably undermined. An election conducted in a politically suffocating environment cannot credibly be presented as an expression of popular sovereignty.

More fundamentally, the President's refusal to prioritize the constitution-making process—an essential foundation for credible elections—reveals the persistence of an authoritarian instinct. The constitutional process was meant to help reunite a fractured nation, reform institutions that have repeatedly produced instability, and place political power firmly under the rule of law. To bypass

that process while invoking democracy is deeply contradictory. Democratic language cannot conceal authoritarian practice.

A government confident in the legitimacy of the electoral process should answer substantive questions rather than impugn the motives of its critics. Can political parties organize freely across the country? Can opposition leaders travel, assemble, campaign, and communicate without intimidation? Are electoral institutions independent, adequately funded, and operational? Can security forces protect all candidates and voters impartially? Can displaced citizens participate? Are there credible voter register and an agreed constitutional and legal framework? Are the media and civic space genuinely open? Are there trusted mechanisms for resolving electoral disputes? Until these questions are answered convincingly, lectures on elections and democracy from an administration that has presided over more than two decades of authoritarian rule ring hollow. These are not excuses for postponing democracy. They are among the conditions that make elections democratic.

The Office of the President repeatedly declares that “the people must decide.” On that principle, the PCCA agrees entirely. But popular sovereignty cannot begin and end at the ballot box. If citizens are truly the ultimate source of political legitimacy, they must have a meaningful role in determining not only who governs, but how they are governed. A democratic process reduced to voting alone is an impoverished form of democracy. If the Office of the President wishes to be taken seriously on democratic governance, it should support an Inclusive National Political Dialogue through which South Sudanese can deliberate on peace, the constitution, the structure of the state, and the conditions for credible elections. Pressing ahead with a process widely regarded as lacking legitimacy would suggest not democratic confidence, but a preoccupation with retaining power while ignoring the deeper demands of the nation.

South Sudan still faces unresolved foundational questions concerning the structure and purpose of the state, the distribution and limits of political power, decentralization, federalism, the relationship between national and local authority, reconstruction of the security sector, management of national resources, justice and reconciliation, equal citizenship, constitutional government, and the restoration of trust between citizens and the state. Elections alone cannot answer these questions. They determine who exercises public authority; they do not by themselves determine the legitimate constitutional and institutional framework within which that authority should operate.

This is why the PCCA has called for an Inclusive National Political Dialogue leading to a binding National Political Settlement. Such a process is not an alternative to elections. It is a pathway toward elections that can genuinely conclude the transition. It would allow South Sudanese society—not political and military elites alone—to agree on the foundations of the political order, establish a strictly time-bound transition to implement the settlement, complete the permanent constitution, reconstruct essential state and security institutions, and then return sovereign authority to citizens through a constitutional referendum and credible elections.

The Office of the President also invokes the liberation struggle and challenges those who, in its view, diminish the contribution of the liberation generation. The PCCA recognizes and honors the immense sacrifices made by all South Sudanese who struggled for freedom, including combatants and civilians whose suffering, resistance, displacement, and perseverance sustained the liberation. No serious account of South Sudan’s history can erase President Salva Kiir’s long participation in

that struggle, nor is that the issue in dispute. The real question is what became of the promise of liberation after independence. Instead of building the accountable, just, and capable state for which so many South Sudanese sacrificed, the country has been subjected to deep corruption, institutional weakness, political repression, and profound economic hardship. Many veterans and former comrades who carried the liberation struggle now live in poverty and neglect, while the state itself has become increasingly dependent on external security support. The liberation legacy should therefore not be used to shield contemporary leadership from accountability; it should be the standard against which that leadership is judged.

What is clear is that historical contribution to liberation and contemporary political legitimacy are not the same thing. Liberation credentials may command enduring respect and historical recognition, but democratic legitimacy must be continuously earned through accountable government, constitutional rule, public trust, service delivery and the freely expressed consent of citizens. The liberation struggle belongs to the people of South Sudan; it cannot become the permanent political property of any individual, generation, party, or government. Its purpose was not to create an indefinite entitlement to rule, but to secure the freedom of South Sudanese to determine their own political destiny.

The challenge of independence was therefore always to transform liberation legitimacy into constitutional legitimacy; revolutionary authority into accountable public institutions; military command into professional security structures; comradeship into equal citizenship; and historical entitlement into periodically renewed democratic consent. Fifteen years after independence, that transformation remains incomplete.

Respect for liberators must never become immunity from accountability. President Kiir's contribution to liberation can be acknowledged without shielding his government from judgment over its record since independence. Indeed, democratic government requires exactly this distinction. Leaders must ultimately be judged not only by what they contributed yesterday, but by how they govern today.

The Office of the President also states that those who believe the government has failed should organize and persuade voters. In principle, that is precisely how democracy should work. The difficulty is that President Kiir's record raises serious doubts about his commitment to genuine political competition, particularly given the violent rupture of 2013 following an internal challenge to his leadership. If the President truly wants competing political forces to make their case to the South Sudanese people, then the government bears the responsibility to create a genuinely open political marketplace in which all actors can organize, campaign, communicate, and compete on substantially fair terms. Formal permission to participate is not enough where one side controls state institutions, public resources, security structures, administrative authority, and public communication while others operate under restriction, intimidation, or insecurity. The burden of proof therefore rests principally with the authorities administering the process: they must demonstrate that elections whenever they are held, will be sufficiently free, fair, competitive, and credible to command public confidence and national acceptance.

The larger question is whether the President genuinely believes his government has a record of success on which to seek a democratic mandate. After more than two decades in power, the state still struggles to meet basic financial obligations, deliver essential public services, provide security, or

demonstrate sustained institutional and economic progress. If the Office of the President truly believes that this record reflects successful governance, then we are confronting a profound disconnect between the reality experienced by citizens and the reality perceived at the center of power. The tragedy of the past fifteen years cannot be dismissed as an unfortunate national episode detached from leadership; it is part of the record on which this government must be judged.

South Sudan must also confront a deeper truth. The country has endured years of war, displacement, institutional decay, economic collapse, corruption, humanitarian dependency, communal violence, and repeated transitional extensions under largely the same political leadership. These realities cannot simply be described as unfortunate conditions that “South Sudan has endured.” Political accountability requires asking who governed during this period, who controlled the institutions responsible for implementing the peace agreement, who managed public resources, and why the conditions repeatedly promised for elections were not completed. The question before the country is therefore not simply whether another election date should be kept. It is whether South Sudan can finally break the cycle in which deadlines are announced while the underlying political crisis remains unresolved.

The PCCA therefore calls for a national conversation grounded in a simple proposition: the people must indeed have the final word, but their sovereignty must be real, not ceremonial. They must be empowered to shape the political settlement, approve the permanent constitutional order, and freely choose their leaders in elections conducted under conditions worthy of a sovereign people.

The liberation generation gave South Sudan its independence. Its historic task now is to help ensure that the country passes from liberation politics to constitutional democracy. The greatest tribute to those who fought for freedom would not be to preserve their generation permanently in power, but to build institutions strong enough to allow every generation of South Sudanese to govern itself peacefully.

The PCCA therefore remains committed to free and fair elections, a permanent constitution, peaceful democratic transfer of power, and an end to perpetual transition. But these objectives must be reached through a credible national political settlement that addresses the root causes of the crisis and creates the conditions under which elections can unite the country rather than deepen its divisions. South Sudan does not need elections instead of democracy. It needs elections that make democracy possible.

The People Shall Prevail