Youth Participation in South Sudan's Civil Wars: The Perception of Victimhood*

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Abstract

Scholars have often focused on the negative involvement of young people in violent conflicts in the African continent, subsequently denying them the attention they need during post-conflict peacebuilding processes. In South Sudan, this study challenges the negative portrayal of young people who participated in the country's civil wars, arguing that they were victims of their political and economic circumstances. Using primary and secondary data, the author interviewed youth leaders leading various civil society youth organisations promoting the country's peacebuilding process and used academic papers, websites, newspaper articles, and reports of credible local and international organizations. The paper concludes that while indeed young people participated in South Sudan's pre and post-independent conflicts, they were mere victims of their political and economic predicaments. Thus, instead of entirely viewing young people's role in the conflicts from the 'perpetrator angle,' we should focus on examining it from the 'perception of victimhood.' This lays the foundation for their full inclusion in the post-conflict peacebuilding processes such as disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

Introduction

Some scholars such as Omeje (2005), Urdal (2006), Aning and Atta-Asamoah (2011), and Paalo (2017) have primarily focused on the negative involvement of young people in violent conflicts in Africa. In the case of South Sudan, this study challenges the negative portrayal of young people who participated in the country's civil wars. The argument of this paper is simple: the youth who participated in South Sudan's armed conflicts were not deliberate perpetrators, but rather victims of their political and economic predicaments. They were either brainwashed to fight for causes they did not support or were victims of their political and economic circumstances.

South Sudan, despite being the newest country in Africa, possesses a history that predates its official establishment in 2011. Formerly known as Southern Sudan, the region operated autonomously under the central government of Sudan. Before attaining independence in 1956, Sudan was subject to the rule of various powers, including Ottoman-Egypt, the Mahdist regime, and British-Egyptian condominium rule (Derso, 2012; Ewald, 1991). Of particular importance is the British-Egyptian rule which endured from 1899 until 1956, when Sudan achieved independence (Sanderson, 1962). The condominium rule implemented regulations such as the 'Southern Policy (Mayo, 1994) or the 1922 Passports and Permits Ordinance' (see Ruay, 1994; Dani, 2016), resulting in the socio-cultural division of Sudan. While Britain introduced English and Christianity to Southern Sudanese, Northern Sudanese remained Arabized and Islamized. Following independence, the absence of comprehensive plans for the unification of the two regions led to sustained marginalization and historical repression of Southern Sudanese by the central government in Northern Sudan (Derso, 2012; Aljazeera, 2011; Deng and Ruay, 1994). This protracted situation culminated in fifty years of civil wars between the two regions, with a resolution only coming with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. After gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan was immediately embroiled in a deadly civil war, causing significant devastation, including among its substantial youth population.

Young people, including the youth, played significant roles in these violent conflicts, often violating international humanitarian law. However, a closer examination of these roles prompts us to inquire whether these acts were deliberate as portrayed in the academic literature or were outcomes of the endemic failures of the system. As portrayed throughout the article, these youth were merely victims of their political and economic predicaments dictated by years of systemic corruption and historical youth marginalization perpetrated by corrupt political leadership over

decades of political rule.

This study provides a new perspective on the role of South Sudanese youth throughout the country's turbulent history. In a continent where post-conflict peacebuilding processes, such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, have historically marginalized a highly affected group of people (Mbawa, 2003), this article aims to bring attention to the youth affected by civil wars. This may contribute to the full reintegration of young people affected by civil wars, especially in South Sudan.

This paper utilized a qualitative research approach to collect in-depth and detailed data. Data was gathered from seven youth leaders who are actively engaged in peacebuilding efforts through well-established youth organizations in South Sudan. The researcher conducted a series of structured and semi-structured interviews to gain insights and perspectives from the youth leaders regarding their experiences, challenges, and young people's role in the South Sudanese armed conflicts. This methodology allowed for a comprehensive analysis and understanding of the youth's position and roles in these conflicts. The study's original contribution is underpinned by the interviews with youth leaders, providing significant insights into the reality of South Sudan's youth from the perspective of the victims, themselves.

To meet the ethical demands of the author's university, the Social Sciences University of Ankara, the university's ethics committee provided the author with an ethics approval certificate. This certificate is attached to this paper as an appendix. For ethical considerations, respondents are labelled as Youth Leader 1, Youth Leader 2 etc, without revealing their identities. Furthermore, the author reviewed academic papers, credible reports of regional and international organizations and documentary and archival records of international media institutions such as the British Broadcasting Cooperation, Aljazeera and the like.

Although the study remains highly relevant to academic discourse, it has some limitations that should be noted. One of these limitations is that a larger sample size would have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. However, due to the ongoing war situation in the country, it was difficult to reach as many youth leaders as required. Moreover, it was even more challenging to reach youth ex-combatants for interviews. In future studies, these limitations must be considered in evaluating the role of youth in armed conflicts, especially in the case of South Sudan.

This article first introduces the study, laying the theoretical and methodological foundation for the rest of the paper. It then moves on to trace the violent historical processes that led to the country's eventual independence, paying special attention to the role of the youth within this chequered history. Subsequently, after examining Southern Sudan's successful secession from North Sudan[1], the paper proceeds to assess the post-independence armed conflicts that occurred in South Sudan and the role of South Sudanese youth in these conflicts. Finally, the last section concludes the paper, weighing the argument of the paper, and youth leaders' position, with the literature.

1.1. Southern Sudan, Historicity and the Youth

South Sudan has a rich history that goes back many centuries. Before becoming the world's newest state in 2011, South Sudan was a semi-autonomous region known as Southern Sudan, within Sudan, administered by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement- SLPM. The northern part of Sudan, with the central government, which is known as Sudan today, was mainly inhabited by Arabs and it remains the same today (Deng and Ruay, 1994). The southern part, now known as South Sudan, was predominantly populated by black people and has remained the same until today. This racial composition is a complex tapestry, shaped by various factors. The region's pre-colonial era saw migration playing a significant role in determining the demographics of the region. The Arab composition of North Sudan can be traced back to medieval Arab adventurers who travelled into sub-Saharan Africa in the 16th century, describing the land as 'Bilad es-Sudan,' an Arabic term meaning the 'land of the Blacks,' (Deng and Ruay, 1994). Over time, the various indigenous tribes of Sudan, such as the Nuba and Zing, coexisted with the arriving Arabs, resulting in a rich and diverse cultural makeup (Deng and Ruay, 1994; Leonardi, 2007; Beswick, 2016).

However, the Ottoman-Egyptian conquest of Sudan from 1821 to 1855 (Warburg, 1985; Ewald, 1991) brought about significant changes. The Sudanese people experienced brutal subjugation and forced labor, with the Ottoman-Egyptian forces imposing their will on the region (Collins, 1976; Warburg, 1989; Derso, 2012). This period saw the introduction of Islam as the dominant religion in the region, which replaced traditional African religions (Ewald, 1991). Also, upon the arrival of the British in 1899, the condominium rule established with Egypt further divided Sudan. Britain introduced English and Christianity to the Southerners and barred the

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[1] The term "North Sudan" is used in this context to refer to present day Sudan.

highly Arabized and Islamized Northerners from interacting with them (Ruay, 1994; Dani, 2016). After independence, Northern Sudan's bid to overturn this policy saw the central government in the North introducing Arabic as the only official language in the country (Abdelhay et al., 2016). This greatly affected Southern Sudanese who mainly conducted their official affairs using English. In Moses' words, for instance, the discrimination of Southerners in the academic arena is made clear in his interview with Al-Jazeera in 2011:

> "When I started school in the North, they told my father 'Your son is studying the religion of non-believers, and he reads English. Here, we do not have the English and religion of non-believers. He must take Islamic studies.' When we went to the Ministry of Education, they told us to go back to the head teacher to solve our problem. We went and he refused to make any changes. Thus, I took Islamic studies. Even when I only failed Islamic studies, I repeated the entire year- year 3." (Aljazeera English, 2011: 6:25).

Put together, the rule of Ottoman-Egypt, Anglo-Egyptian Condominium and the post-independence governance marked by discrimination and oppressive policies deepened the divide between Northern and Southern Sudan, leading to two major civil wars between 1955 and 1972, and again from 1983 to 2005 (Collins, 1988; Aljazeera English, 2011; Woodward, 2011; Dersso, 2012; Khalid, 2018), which caused significant loss of life and displacement. The first Sudanese civil war was triggered by a specific event. This is explained below by Joseph Lagu, the former Southern Sudanese rebel commander who formed the first major rebel movement, the 'Anyanya', during Sudan's first civil armed conflict against the Northern Sudanese government:

> "When a group of Southern Sudanese soldiers within the Sudanese army refused to obey their Northern Sudanese commanders, one of the Northern Sudanese commanders shot a Southern Sudanese soldier in the arm as a warning for disobedience. Southern Sudanese soldiers then broke into the garrison, got weapons, and killed northern commanders and any Northern Sudanese civilians they could find." (Aljazeera English, 2011: 11:36).

Within the course of the conflict, power in Northern Sudan changed hands. Gaafar Muhammad al-Nimeiry took power in a coup in 1969 (Khalid, 2018). With him, the first Sudanese conflict eventually ended three years later when he and the South Sudanese Anyanya rebel movement signed the Addis Ababa Agreement (Woodward, 2011; Khalid, 2018). This agreement was incorporated into the Sudanese constitution adopted the following year. Subsequently,

Southern Sudan became an autonomous region courtesy of Sudan's 1973 constitution (Dersso, 2012).

However, this period of relief, dignity, inclusivity, and hope would only last as much as the central government in the North would allow it. In a dramatic move in 1983, President Nimeiry degraded Southern Sudan's autonomy to "three weak and powerless administrative regions," striping southerners of their autonomy (Dersso, 2012). Johnson (2003) has it that the second Sudanese civil war started in 1983 (see also Savage, 2014) in retaliation to Sudan's central government's suspension of the constitution that gave southerners autonomy and against several racial and ethnic discriminations suffered by southerners under the northern government. Southerners vehemently disliked President Nimeiry's policies including his unilateral decision to violate the 1973 constitution by dissolving Southern Sudan's autonomy in 1983. This and a combination of other factors gave birth to the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement/Army-SPLM/A (Collins, 1988; Tounsel, 2016), with Dr John Garang as the leader (Collins, 1988) and the second major armed conflict that would last for the next 22 years ending only in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

Equally, these conflicts had significant effects on the youth, including children. A considerable proportion of young people fought alongside the Sudanese Government's military and opposition groups such as SPLM/A. This position is supported by the views of young people themselves and existing literature. For example, Youth Leader 3 expressed the impact of these civil wars on the youth population more vividly below:

> "It is not new to recruit young people from South Sudan into armed groups. History shows that during Dr. John Garang's secessionist movement to liberate Southern Sudan from the North, most of the SPLM fighting forces were composed of young individuals who were mobilized through coercion."[2]

As also noted by Leonardi (2007), young people, including children, were key targets of recruitment by the major parties in these wars; many who evaded capture and forceful recruitment became known as the 'Lost Boys.' In 1994, there were over 20,000 displaced children and youth, aged 7 to 17, who had also lost their parents and had stopped going to school (Biel, 2003). Nearly half of the 20,000 young men and boys who fled Sudan during this sad exodus -known as the Lost Boys of Sudan- died from malnutrition, hunger, murder, and other causes on their way to

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[2] Author's online interview conducted in March 2023

refugee camps in Kenya -a neighboring country- (International Rescue Committee -IRC, 2014). The 20,000 children mentioned above were thought to have resisted capture by both the military and the SPLM (Biel, 2003; IRC, 2014). Youth have also exploited their military enlistment to make investments in their home or family domain to fend against capture by the military domain and the domain of "home" (Leonardi, 2007).

Many youths might have also joined, especially the liberation movements to fight dictatorship, historical repression, and marginalization and to secure their future as this was the main goal of the SPLM. Judging from historical documentaries[3], Sudanese soldiers and members of the liberation movements appeared to be mainly young boys. The main goal of these liberation movements and the conditions that precipitated their establishment, strongly point to the key argument of this paper: that the youths who took part in various conflicts as pointed out by the literature were mere victims of their political and economic predicaments. As presented throughout the discourse on Sudan's post-independence wars (and as it will also be presented later in the sections that discuss South Sudan's post-independence wars), political repression, marginalization, racial, cultural, and economic discrimination, orchestrated by central governments in Sudan, had forced Southerners, mostly young people, to take up arms to defend their future through violence.

Eventually, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 brought an end to the long-standing conflict, paving the way for the eventual independence of Southern Sudan in 2011. The CPA addressed issues of power-sharing, wealth-sharing, and self-determination, which were the main causes of the civil war. However, the implementation of the agreement was slow, and the region continued to face various challenges, including inter-tribal violence, political instability, and economic difficulties eventually leading to the secession of the South in 2011.

1.2. Southern Sudan, Independence and the Springboard for Civil Wars

In 2011, the people of Southern Sudan voted overwhelmingly for the complete independence of the country from Northern Sudan, as stipulated in the 2005 CPA (UNMISS, n.d.). The Liberation Council of the SPLM/A, led by Salva Kiir Mayardit and Riek Machar, continued to oversee the affairs of the new nation. For the people of Southern Sudan, independence was a long-awaited dream fulfilled, offering hope for a better future.

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[3] See Aljazeera English, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7okF15IeSXE.

However, some academics viewed this future as not particularly bright. They envisioned challenges in state building, such as managing oil and water and ensuring an orderly transition. The country's developmental, political, and security challenges were seen as great obstacles to progress, making it reliant on international assistance (Belloni, 2011; Nathan, 2011). De Waal (2014) and The Sentry (2019) also criticized South Sudanese political leadership, referring to it as a 'kleptocratic state', with corruption in its major resources, particularly oil, projected to lead to prolonged conflicts and the destruction of the country. Unfortunately, this fear eventually manifested through civil wars shortly after the country's independence.

1.3. South Sudan and the Civil Wars

As mentioned above, challenges with the orderly transition of the country started to manifest immediately after the referendum. South Sudan's top political godfathers started disagreeing over key political issues. The stories surrounding the cradle of the South Sudanese post-independence conflicts are overly complicated. To unravel this, we need to undertake two processes. First, to understand why South Sudan's vice president and other cabinet members were sacked and second, whether this may have ignited the civil war. There are two stories surrounding the sacking of Riek Machar, the country's vice president, and other cabinet members. The one told by South Sudan's president and the other told by others. On the one hand, President Kiir believes he sacked his vice and several other cabinet members due to an attempted or a failed coup d'état they had both implicitly and explicitly participated in (Radon and Logan, 2014). Consequently, Machar was relieved of his duty of being the vice president of South Sudan. While President Kiir attempted to arrest him and others, Machar fled to safety and started a guerilla warfare (through the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement in Opposition-SPLM-IO) against the Kiir government while others were detained. However, as captivating as the coup d'état story of President Kiir may be, it is exceedingly difficult to validate such a story put forward by the president (Aljazeera English, 2016). On the other hand, President Kiir is said to have felt threatened by Machar's call to challenge his leadership of the SPLM party and that of the country in a democratic process. In the following excerpt, an interview with a prominent youth leader in South Sudan accounts for this 'democratic version' of the story.

> "Riek Machar demanded democratic processes. Among other things, Machar asked for elections within the SPLM political wing to be periodic and elections should be held especially for the party leadership position. Moreover, these elections must be held by secret ballot and not by 'raising

hands' as they used to be. As such, he had decided to challenge the current president and leader of the SPLM political party for the position of chair and in the subsequent national election."[4]

The excerpts above have also been supported by some sources with Aljazeera English (2016) citing disagreement over who should lead the presidential race of the party to be the real cause of the civil war. In this case, while President Kiir cited a coup d'état attempt to be the main cause of the removal of his vice and other cabinet members, it is also possible that the real cause of his move to sack his vice president might have been that he felt threatened by the democratic demands of Machar, his vice. Above all, while disagreement remains over the real cause of the sacking, the point to note here is that the civil war started after President Kiir sacked and attempted to arrest Machar and the others (note that while others were arrested, Machar escaped). The national army then split along ethnic lines with some backing Kiir and others backing Machar (Aljazeera English, 2016).

There is also a second position concerning the causes of the civil war in South Sudan. Scholars such as Nyadera (2018) relate the causes of the armed conflicts in Africa's newest country to ethnic animosities and rivalry. But this has been quickly debunked by other scholars. For example, to negate Nyadera's argument of 'ethnic animosities and rivalry' being the key driver of South Sudan's civil war, Radon and Logan (2014) argued that six out of the eleven political figures detained by the government concerning the suspected coup hailed from the Dinka ethnic group (President Kiir's tribes' men), only two were Nuers (Machar's tribe), and the remaining three were from other ethnic groupings. Therefore, while ethnic animosities may be part of the factors that exacerbated the civil war, as observed above, trigger factors point directly to a power struggle between the two key political elites within the SPLM Liberation Council. However, Adeba (2014), noted that the conflict however developed ethnic undertones that turned the Nuer and the Dinka, the major ethnic groups in South Sudan, against one another, even though its basic causes were political (Adeba, 2014; cited in Young, 2016). Figure 1 below shows South Sudan's ethnic composition.

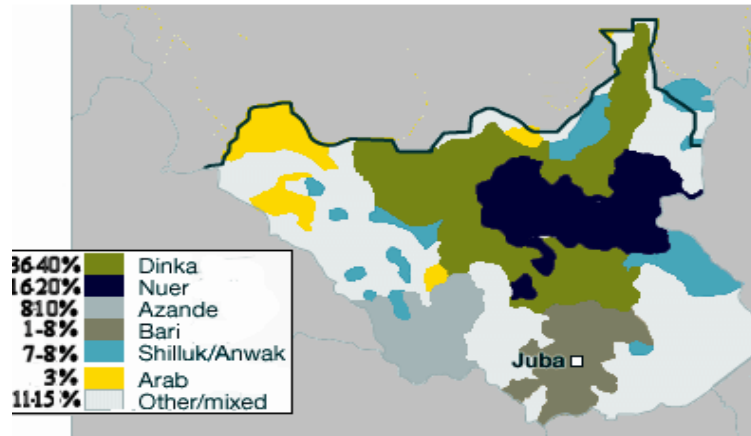[4] Youth Leader 2, Author's online interview conducted in March 2023

Figure 1. *Ethnic Composition of South Sudan* (GlobalSecurity.org)

The political incapacity of the SPLM itself may have contributed to the conflicts that have occurred within its structure. As Lyman (2013) pointed out, with a small political branch, the SPLM party is still primarily a liberation army. Moreover, the military wing of the government of South Sudan, Sudan People's Liberation Army-SPLA (Savage, 2014) is more of a coalition of militias, each of which is frequently based on ethnicity than it is a cohesive national force, and almost all of its top officers are former generals.

The conflict eventually ended with IGAD's brokered peace deal signed in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia in August 2015. This accord, Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCRSS) [5] , made a provision for the setting up of a government of national unity that is purely transitional wherein the country's first vice president was to be elected by the armed opposition, the SPLM-IO (UN Peacemaker, n.d).

1.3.1. The 2015 Accord and the Relapse

As it is with several peace deals, the 2015 South Sudanese peace accord faced enormous challenges to the extent of a relapse to violence and subsequently another civil war. It seemed from the beginning that some key parties to the agreement did not anticipate a positive outcome. There were differences in opinion regarding the full implementation of the accord. For instance, while President Kiir is believed to have voiced negative prospects for the 2015 peace deal, his vice president was hopeful. In different statements, they stated as follows:

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[5] See IGAD https://shorturl.at/qrEYZ, accessed 10th May, 2023.

President Salva Kiir Mayardit:

"We are not moving forward with the implementation of this agreement because of the way it was designed. And when I signed this agreement in August last year, I told Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni, that it was not meant to be implemented."[6]

Riek Machar:

"The accord should be carried out by both the spirit and the letter of the accord. Because the deal represents a road plan for reforms and, secondly, for establishing an entirely novel system of governance for the country that would lead to democratic elections."[7]

With statements like these, it was clear that the country would eventually relapse into another deadly civil war. Indeed, it did. President Kiir and Machar were in a meeting to discuss ways forward for the 2015 peace accord when fighting broke out outside of the meeting premises between security forces of the government (Mainly Salva Kiir) and the bodyguards of Riek Machar. This and subsequent events led to the outbreak of South Sudan's second civil war after independence.

1.3.2. The 2018 Deal: A Revitalized Peace

The second South Sudanese conflict, since independence, eventually ended in August 2018 with the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS[8]) being signed, and the Reconstituted Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU) being established in 2021 (IGAD, 2018). As with many peace accords, the revitalized agreement made arrangements to hold national elections as part of the implementation of the provisions of the accord. However, there have been several challenges. The power-sharing transitional government headed by President Kiir, with Machar as his vice plus four other vices, announced a two-year extension of the transitional government and thus postponed South Sudan's first election since independence to December 2024 (Crisis Group, 2023). President Kiir defended that he took such a decision to prevent another relapse and not with a motive to stay in power longer. His first vice president, Machar also supported him that, indeed, elections need political space, and such a space did not exist in South Sudan at the moment (Machol, 2022).

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[6] See Aljazeera English, 12:00, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uB0kf_liEQ4.
[7] See Aljazeera English, 2016, 15:39, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uB0kf_liEQ4.
[8] See IGAD, https://shorturl.at/dqU29, accessed 10th May, 2023.

1.4. The Civil War and the Youth

The youth played active roles in South Sudan's civil war. However, like many other African nations where youth have experienced "the bitterness of war," youth involvement in the civil war in South Sudan is a result of their political and economic predicament. In other words, they were unintentional victims of the conflict and violence rather than "deliberate participants" in it.

Young people's role in the South Sudanese conflict has received some attention in both academic and grey literature (UN Human, 2013; Craze, et al., 2016). Since the conflict erupted in 2013, there have been reports that young people have played significant roles in it. For example, a UN report (2013) shows that armed youth organizations like the Gojam or "White Army" and the SPLM/A-IO engaged in combat together. According to the same report, armed youth also assisted government troops, such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army, in planning their operations. Unconfirmed reports, such as those obtained from the author's discussion with South Sudanese youth leaders, indicate that young people also make up most of the membership of other, smaller rebel groups like the National Salvation Army (NAS). However, regarding the role of certain youth groups like the Nuer White Army in the South Sudanese conflict, Young (2016) has been quick to warn that since the White Army is a creation of the community, its defence of the community and attacks on government buildings and towns largely serve community interests rather than those of the SPLM-IO.

Since the war erupted in 2013, South Sudan has experienced grievous human rights violations (United Nations Mission in South Sudan,2014; UNICEF, 2016). Most of the grievous violations of international law such as sexual slavery, rape, looting and destruction, killing, and abduction, have occurred in the Unity State region, the stronghold of the SPLM/O (Craze et al., 2016). Implicitly, these crimes point to the youth as part of the perpetrators. As such, without consideration of the rationale surrounding their involvement, the literature above has unequivocally accused the youth of being deliberate perpetrators of these crimes.

While the literature above presents the role of youths as drivers or part of the drivers of conflict and co-perpetrators of heinous crimes in the South Sudanese war, it is significant to understand that further examination of the rationale of this role reveals quite a different story. Youth participants were mere victims of these conflicts. These youths were either brainwashed or sometimes forcefully mobilized. As rightly stated by a UN (2023) report, geographical, racial, and

other identity-based markers have been used by political, military, and traditional elites to incite factions against one another, and they frequently exploit them. As a result, there is a culture of intense mistrust, retaliation, and violence that people use to acquire and assert their political, and socioeconomic control over others. According to Human Rights Watch (2015), thousands of young people, some as young as thirteen, were enlisted in armed groups during the South Sudanese conflict. UNICEF (2016) also estimated that by 2016, since the beginning of the fighting in December 2013, approximately sixteen thousand kids had been enlisted by the parties to the conflict. Sometimes, the youths also took the law into their own hands to change their own political and economic realities. As presented in Stringham and Forney (2017), the 'white army,' mostly youth militias, frequently rebelled against the governing elite, whom they held accountable for the rising gaps between urban and rural areas across ethnic boundaries.

Young people's decision to join armed movements could also not be far from their economic realities. According to Doki (2014), a senior professor of development studies, at Juba University noted that revenues from South Sudan's oil were not being harnessed to employ the country's youth, thus nursing hatred for the few government officials who appeared to have enjoyed the oil revenue. This fragile state of the country's youth made them highly susceptible to being recruited into violence. In fact, in a 2011 World Bank report, the majority of young people cited unemployment as the reason for joining armed movements (World Bank, 2011). As a result, Deng (2016) asserted that youth unemployment significantly affects how much young people contribute to South Sudan's gross domestic product since as compared to the regional (17%) and income group (13%) averages, youth unemployment is greater than 20% in 2022. In 2023, 76% of South Sudanese needed humanitarian assistance (World Bank, 2023).

There is no doubt that the literature discussed above, regarding youth combatants being victims of their political and economic predicaments, closely mirrors actual events. The author engaged seven energetic youth leaders from South Sudan to understand young people's role in the South Sudanese conflict from the young people's perspective. It was evident from their responses that the youths who took part in the fighting did so under duress or because of their very own political and economic circumstances. These vulnerabilities are outlined in the excerpts below:

Youth Leader 1:
"Wherever there is a conflict, there are unmet needs. In South Sudan, the majority of the combat troops are composed of young persons under thirty, specifically, the National Salvation Army

(NAS), and the SPLM/IO, a group in which my brother fought. They join these groups for several reasons. They are also compelled by economic hardship. Additionally, they are being coerced into joining the fighting troops."[9]

Youth Leader 4:

"South Sudanese youth joined rebel movements because they wanted to show their allegiance to particular ethnic groups. These youth were being misled into fighting along tribal lines, which was not in their best interests as individuals. As a young person in such situations, you have very few options, especially when survival is at stake."[10]

One of the major weaknesses, as stated by Youth Leader 1, is the economic situation of young people, which is caused by subpar political leadership that dates back to South Sudan's pre-independence era. If we were to take a deeper look at the viewpoint of other South Sudanese youth leaders on why young people participated in the conflicts in South Sudan, we would also see that one of the main arguments of this paper -that the youth who engaged in the conflict were victims rather than deliberate drivers- is clearly outlined.

Youth Leader 2:

"The majority of the rebel movements took advantage of young people's idleness and unemployment. Young individuals under thirty make up 71% of the combat groups. Instead of actively inciting violence, they were only its victims. These youngsters were primarily being brainwashed. They were misled by political leaders using phrases like "the other side is targeting us—our tribe." "We need to fight and deal with them to improve the country for us because they are the reason you are unemployed."[11]

Youth Leader 5:

"The youth were used by the warring parties to inflict atrocities on communities. While several of them, including children, were forcefully recruited, others were brainwashed into believing that the socio-economic predicament of the country, especially that of the youth, could only be addressed through fighting and the youth had a major role to play in such a fight. And that was it; they fought for what they believed was a fight for their future." [12]

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[9] Author's online interview conducted in April 2023.
[10] Author's online interview conducted in May 2023.
[11] Author's online interview conducted in March 2023.
[12] Author's online interviews conducted in May 2023.

It is evident from the argument made above, which is supported by both primary and secondary sources, that the youth who took part in South Sudan's civil war were victims of their political and economic challenges rather than being "deliberate drivers of the conflict." As such, it would be very unfair and uninformed to categorically paint these youths as deliberate drivers of conflict and violence in South Sudan.

Conclusion

South Sudan has gone through several facets of cultural, economic, and political instability; as well as civil wars after gaining independence from the North. Within these wars, the role of the youth has taken the central stage. This study has introduced South Sudan's turbulent history, its post-independent conflicts and the role of the youth. In detail, it first examined the country's history with Sudan with a special focus on the youth within this chequered history.

At independence, the discourse revealed that the newly independent South relapsed into two major armed conflicts in 2013 and 2016. In these conflicts, the role of the youth was addressed. This article established that while young people indeed participated in the conflicts, they were victims of their political and economic circumstances rather than being deliberate perpetrators of the conflict. In summary, the political elites were using the youth to execute ethnic and political violence on their behalf. The lack of economic opportunity also exacerbated this victimhood.

This vulnerability was vehemently and vividly expressed by the various youth leaders interviewed for this study, challenging the widely held perspective in the literature of youth being deliberate participants in armed conflicts. Interview excerpts from *"Youth leader-1,2,3,4 and 5"* unequivocally demonstrate how these youth were either being brainwashed into fighting for courses other than theirs or were being subdued by their political and economic predicament.

Explicitly, this study's results emphasize the critical needs of young people during the delicate phase of post-conflict peacebuilding. Traditionally, processes like disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration have overlooked the youth, leading to their inadequate reintegration into society. Despite the previously mentioned limitations to the study, generally, this article effectively introduces a fresh perspective to the conversation about youth, conflict, and peace, highlighting the distinct ways in which armed conflicts impact them.

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