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**Beneath the surface:
SOUTH SUDAN'S
INTELLIGENCE
SERVICES' REIGN
OF TERROR**

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KEY FINDINGS

This report exposes the National Security Service (NSS) of South Sudan as a principal instrument of repression, democratic regression, and instability. Established to safeguard national security, the NSS has instead evolved into a 40,000-strong personalised political militia with unchecked power. The NSS is fundamentally instrumentalised to retain President Salva Kiir's centralised power of the state, society, the economy and international partners. Its activities have not only undermined efforts to achieve peace, democratic governance, civil liberties, and the rule of law within the country but have also extended its reach beyond South Sudan's borders.

The NSS operates like a state within a state, a driver of political control, fear-based loyalty, repression and a counterweight to neutralise any dissent, military threats or coup attempts against President Salva Kiir. Allegations of shadow networks, including groups carrying out extrajudicial killings at the behest of senior officials, underscore the agency's role in consolidating regime power. The NSS has also neutered freedom of expression, assembly, political pluralism, the press and civil society with the use of a wide system of surveillance, censorship mechanisms and bureaucratic restrictions. Central to the NSS's pervasive influence lies the extensive powers granted through the 2014 National Security Service Act and its subsequent amendments. These powers include arbitrary detention, surveillance, and property seizure, all carried out with minimal legal oversight. The NSS consistently exceeds constitutional limits, engaging in policing and other extra-legal activities far surpassing its officially mandated intelligence-gathering role, and is frequently implicated in arbitrary detentions, torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances.

This unfettered authority has directly facilitated a wide range of human rights abuses, in line with the ruling party's intolerance for dissent, public scrutiny, accountability and criticism. Detention

centres, such as the notorious 'Blue House', serve as grim sites where detainees face harsh conditions without trial, enduring physical abuse and other inhumane treatment. Such practices erode the principles of justice and public trust in the rule of law, creating an environment of systemic rights violations and impunity. The cumulative effect of these practices has profoundly undermined democracy and governance in South Sudan. By suppressing dissent, the NSS erodes political pluralism, weakens judicial institutions, and stifles the emergence of alternative political voices. Civil society and media freedom are severely restricted, as organisations are subjected to surveillance, harassment, and financial reprisals.

In addition to direct abuses, an extensive surveillance apparatus bolsters the NSS's repressive tactics. The agency targets political opponents, journalists, and civil society organisations by employing phone tapping, informant networks, and digital monitoring. This pervasive surveillance infrastructure generates an ubiquitous climate of fear that stifles free expression, discourages public political engagement, and effectively silences dissenting voices. Consequently, opposition becomes fragmented and civic participation is curtailed, further entrenching authoritarian control.

The NSS's capacity to repress dissent does not stop at South Sudan's borders. The agency's cross-border operations, often conducted with the complicity of neighbouring states, target dissidents abroad. These transnational repressive practices demonstrate a willingness to violate international norms, further extending its destabilising influence beyond its home territory.

Despite mounting evidence and numerous calls for accountability, the leadership of the NSS continues to operate with impunity. While some individuals and institutions in South Sudan have faced sanctions—often

with lesser criminal culpability—international actors have failed to hold NSS leaders accountable. This lack of meaningful action has emboldened the agency and its leadership to persist in their abuses. It is imperative that the silence surrounding these violations ends and that decisive measures are taken against both past and present leaders of the NSS, thereby confronting impunity and upholding justice in South Sudan. The report underscores the need for comprehensive reform of the NSS as part of a broader strategy to dismantle South Sudan's militarised and exclusionary governance structures.

INTRODUCTION

In many post-conflict and authoritarian states, where institutions are weak and governance structures fragile, intelligence agencies often serve a dual purpose: maintaining national security and reinforcing regime survival.¹ The National Security Service (NSS) of South Sudan epitomizes this trend. Created to safeguard national security, the NSS has evolved into an unchecked instrument of repression, stifling dissent and perpetuating authoritarian control. Its powers, enshrined in the 2014 National Security Service Act and its subsequent amendments, far exceed its constitutional mandate, granting it sweeping authority to arrest, detain, and surveil without adequate judicial oversight.

The role of the NSS in South Sudan must be understood within the broader context of what has been described as a “mutually reinforcing war system” by analysts.² This system, characterized by the interplay of elite interests, fragmented militias, and entrenched grievances, has created a cycle of violence and instability. Such dynamics are not merely the product of isolated events but rather the result of a governance system that thrives on exclusionary politics, ethnic rivalries, and militarised control. The NSS, operating with near-total impunity, is a central actor within this system. By targeting political opponents, suppressing civil society, and exacerbating ethnic divisions, the NSS has established its role as both a product and a driver of South Sudan’s broader governance challenges.

South Sudan’s political journey has been shaped by a history of militarised leadership and unfulfilled aspirations for peace and democracy. The country’s political history is heavily dominated by the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLM/A), which emerged from the war of liberation in the 1980s as both a political organisation and a militarised entity. This dual identity deeply ingrained militarisation into the country’s governance

structures, undermining civilian authority and fostering a culture of authoritarianism. Since independence in 2011, the SPLM/A’s dominance has been marked by factionalism, ethnic divisions, corruption, and power struggles, perpetuating cycles of political violence and instability. It operates, not like a civilian political party, but a militarised liberation movement that struggles to manage diversity and pluralism. Criticism and dissent are therefore seen as treasonous and acts of political subversion requiring violent responses. The SPLM/A’s leaders believe in their historic right to govern, an entitlement that they believe allows them to loot, pillage and implement predatory policies at great cost to peacebuilding, nation and state-building.

The political landscape of South Sudan has been further fractured by a policy of ‘divide and misrule’ strategy, including social reengineering strategies like redrawing boundaries to favour specific ethnic groups, or creating artificial majorities or the presence of one ethnic group at the expense of others.³ The resulting balkanisation has entrenched ethnic divisions, creating fertile ground for political manipulation and armed conflict. Within this fragmented environment, the NSS has emerged as a key actor in maintaining the

1 Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2 Paula Cristina Roque and Remember Miamingi, *Beyond ARCISS: New Fault Lines in South Sudan*, East Africa Report, no. 9 (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, January 2017).

3 Roque and Miamingi, *Beyond ARCISS*, 22.

regime's dominance, leveraging ethnic rivalries and exclusionary politics to suppress dissent and consolidate power. The NSS operates not only as a tool of political repression but also as an enforcer of policies that deepen divisions within South Sudanese society. Its actions align with broader trends of militarised governance and exclusionary politics, contributing to the erosion of national unity and the perpetuation of instability.⁴ By targeting communities perceived as threats and enforcing exclusionary policies, the NSS undermines efforts to build a cohesive and inclusive state, reinforcing the cycles of conflict that plague South Sudan.

This current state of affairs could have been avoided. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, that brought peace between Sudan's National Congress Party (NCP) led by President Omar al-Bashir and the SPLM/A, was designed to establish a foundation for state formation and Security Sector Reform (SSR) in South Sudan, with substantial support from the international community. However, early indications suggested that the SPLA/M was adopting authoritarian practices reminiscent of the oppressive Sudanese regime it had opposed. International actors largely overlooked these warning signs, leading to severe consequences. While the SPLM and its armed wing, the SPLA, were established to function as distinct political and military entities in practice, the SPLA subsumed the SPLM, leading to a profound militarisation of South Sudanese politics and the politicisation of its security apparatus. This fusion resulted in a state where military influence permeated all aspects of governance and society, effectively making South Sudan a country where its military has a country rather than a country with a military. The pervasive nature of this militarisation is evident in the substantial allocation of national resources to defence; for instance, in 2014, approximately 40% of the national budget was dedicated to military expenditures.⁵ Additionally, the presence of numerous armed groups and militias, often aligned with political factions, further

entrenched the military's role in societal affairs, undermining civilian governance and leading to the securitisation of politics and the politicization of security in the country.

Despite these red flags, the international community (in particular the US, UK and Norway "Troika") maintained its unwavering support for the SPLM/A, partly because major actors in the international community had been primary backers of South Sudan's liberation struggle; their credibility becoming closely tied to its success. Any admission of failure in South Sudan's governance was seen as a reflection on those who supported its independence, leading to a selective narrative that prioritised the appearance of stability and peace over addressing the SPLM/A's democratic shortcomings. This strategic choice masked early signs of oppression, with stability prioritised over the values of democratic governance.

Within two years of independence, an internal power struggle had developed within the SPLM/A, rooted in deep-seated ethnic and political divisions. This was also a result of a weak party structure, the disinterest in party reform and the dysfunctional collective leadership structures. This struggle intensified tensions between President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and former Vice President Riek Machar, a Nuer, eventually culminating in the December 2013 conflict in Juba. Fighting erupted between Dinka and Nuer factions within the presidential guard, igniting a wave of ethnically targeted violence against the Nuer population. The SPLM/A fractured into three factions—the SPLM-in Government (IG) under the leadership of Salva Kiir, the SPLM-in Opposition (IO) led by Riek Machar, and the SPLM- former detainees (FD) led by Pagan Amum—each aligning along ethnic and political lines. The violence escalated swiftly, with government forces conducting targeted massacres and house-to-house searches against Nuer civilians in Juba, leading to thousands of deaths and widespread displacement.

4 Roque and Miamingi, *Beyond ARCISS*, 22.

5 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 Country Report: South Sudan* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024), <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SSD>.

The 2014 enactment of South Sudan's National Security Service Act followed the eruption of civil war in December 2013. Although subsequent peace agreements in 2015 and 2018 aimed to stabilise the situation, their repeated extensions and minimal progress underscored the critical need for genuine reform and accountability within the country's political and security structures. The SPLM-IG began openly displaying its penchant for crushing factional opponents and contesting narratives and voices. This deeply ingrained siege mentality placed political opponents, the press and civil society as enemies of the SPLM-IG and therefore the State.⁶ Against this backdrop, the SPLM-IG's intolerance for dissent emerged as a driving force behind the militarisation of the state's security apparatus, particularly the NSS. The SPLM-IG, according to UN findings, instrumentalised the NSS "as a tool to monitor and control the population, and to punish individuals, and their family members, who fall out of favour," turning it into "one of South Sudan's most powerful state institutions, perhaps next only to the presidency."⁷

Influenced by the practices of Sudan's former National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), the NSS—especially its Internal Security Bureau (ISB)—adopted repressive measures that include pervasive surveillance, censorship of criticism, arbitrary and incommunicado detention, unlawful renditions, torture, and extrajudicial killings.

Operating clandestine detention centres often referred to as 'ghost houses', the NSS symbolises brutality and unchecked power. Beyond these coercive tactics, the NSS has also established and maintained an extensive political patronage system that consolidates power for its leaders. It systematically allocates state resources and leverages the NSS's security framework to secure allegiance among political and military leaders. By providing personal and professional security, financial incentives, and prestigious posts, the NSS ensures influential individuals' loyalty to the regime.

Functioning simultaneously as both enforcer and benefactor, the NSS creates an environment of dependency, paranoia and fear, where political survival hinges on absolute allegiance. This entrenched patronage network centralises authority within a limited ruling elite and undermines democratic norms and accountability. As South Sudan struggles to move from a legacy of conflict toward genuine peace, the NSS is one of the most formidable obstacles to stability and transitional arrangements outlined in internationally guaranteed peace processes. Unless the NSS's entrenched power is addressed, South Sudan's prospects for a stable, inclusive, and peaceful future remain precarious, ultimately jeopardising the long-term peace and development the nation urgently needs.

6 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Entrenched Repression: Systematic Curtailment of the Democratic and Civic Space in South Sudan*, 5 October 2023, A/HRC/54/CRP.6.

7 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Entrenched Repression*, A/HRC/54/CRP.6.

ESTABLISHMENT AND EVOLUTION OF THE NSS

The origins of the NSS trace back to South Sudan’s long struggle for independence from Sudan, where intelligence and security operations were key to the SPLM/A’s wartime survival and operational capacity. During the civil war (1983-2005), the SPLM/A—operating as an insurgency—established a military intelligence unit called the Combat Intelligence Unit (CIU).

Purging dissent within the rebel movement was as important as was the movement and operations of the military, for the SPLM/A’s cohesion. The Derg, Ethiopia’s military government, was an instrumental ally in what became known as ‘Project 07’ of the Defence Ministry, which assisted in the formation of the SPLM/A.⁸ Mengistu’s regime was fundamental to the SPLM/A’s initial formation and survival in that it armed the movement directly, providing it with rear bases and training camps and curbing dissent. While the Derg and Ethiopia’s security services facilitated the control of dissent within the SPLM/A and alerted Garang to coup attempts during the first decade, several other commanders took key roles in countering dissent and ordering the killings of their fellow comrades.⁹ As the SPLM/A conquered more territory and began governing civilians the CIU took a broader mandate and was, in 1995, renamed the General Intelligence Service (GIS), with two additional uniformed services: Public Service Organ and Military Intelligence.¹⁰

Following the signing of the CPA in 2005, Sudan’s brutal and loathed National Security

and intelligence Service (NISS) began operating in the South, opening a branch with officers trained in Khartoum. The GIS was integrated into the NISS as per the peace agreement. During this CPA transitional period (2005–2011), the SPLM grappled with the Sudanese government’s NISS operating freely within South Sudan; a legacy of decades of mistrust and betrayed agreements. To counter external interference and protect its leadership, the SPLM established the *Special Branch* under the office of the president, primarily staffed by Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) military intelligence personnel which was headed by General Akol Koor Kuc (that later headed the NSS for over a decade). This newly-formed unit ran parallel to NISS activities and served as a critical safeguard against perceived threats during the delicate transition.¹¹ For historical reasons, the Sudanese NISS was perceived as an instrument of repression, infiltration, fragmentation and control intended to weaken the SPLM and South Sudan. The special branch may still be operational in 2025 according to a senior SPLA general, headed by one of President Kiir’s sons, operating as a counterintelligence unit.¹²

8 Belete Belachew Yihun, “Ethiopia’s Role in South Sudan’s March to Independence 1955–1991,” *African Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (2013): 35–54..

9 Paula Cristina Roque, *Insurgent Nations: Rebel Rule in South Sudan and Angola* (London: Hurst, 2024).

10 Brian Adeba, “Oversight Mechanisms, Regime Security, and Intelligence Service Autonomy in South Sudan,” *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 6 (2020).

11 Brian Adeba, “Oversight Mechanisms, Regime Security, and Intelligence Service Autonomy in South Sudan,” *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 6 (2020): 808–822, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2020.1756624>.

12 Interview with a retired general of the SPLA, who stated that the Special Branch was still operational under the command of the President.

During the critical years leading up to independence, the special branch not only countered external intelligence efforts but also laid the groundwork for South Sudan's own domestic security institutions. As the transitional period progressed, the unit's responsibilities expanded, and its members gained experience in clandestine operations, surveillance, and counterintelligence. This evolving focus, combined with ongoing interactions with Sudanese intelligence elements, gradually blurred the lines between purely defensive measures and more assertive, regime-centric tactics. By the time South Sudan emerged as an independent state in 2011, the structural and operational ethos of the special branch had begun to coalesce into a formalised entity—an evolving institution that would ultimately become known as the NSS.

At the time of independence, Juba appointed a Minister for National Security in the office of the president and established the National Security Service (NSS). The NSS was incorporated into the Transitional Constitution of South Sudan 2011. Articles 159 and 160 of the Constitution provided for the 'principles of national security' and the establishment of 'National Security Services' (NSS) whereby Article 159 established the guiding principles of national security:

National security shall:

- a) be subject to the authority of this Constitution and the law;
- b) be subordinate to civilian authority;
- c) respect the will of the people, the rule of law, democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- d) reflect the diversity of the people of South Sudan in its recruitment and be professional, and its *mandate shall focus on information gathering, analysis*
- e) *and advice to the relevant authorities.*¹³

Article 160(2) charges the NSS with the country's and its people's internal and external security. The NSS has two operational organs: The International Security Bureau and the General Intelligence Bureau. Each of these operational organs is headed by a Director-General appointed by the President with the approval of the Security Council upon the recommendation of the minister in charge.¹⁴ The Security Council consists of the following:

- a) President of the Republic, Chairperson;
- b) Vice-President of the Republic, Deputy Chairperson;
- c) Minister responsible for defence, member;
- d) Minister responsible for foreign affairs, member;
- e) Minister responsible for justice, member;
- f) Minister responsible for finance, member
- g) Minister responsible for interior, member; and
- h) Minister responsible for the National Security Service, secretary.

The Chairperson of the Council may invite any person or persons to attend a council meeting, if necessary, provided that such a person or persons shall not have the right to vote.¹⁵ The NSS is a centralised institution controlled by the presidency. It has significant power, however that power appears to be concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who control the presidency too. The Internal Security Bureau (ISB) focuses on domestic threats, such as political dissent, civil unrest, and perceived insurgencies, especially in urban areas like Juba. It uses surveillance, intimidation, and arbitrary arrests against opposition figures, civil society, and the media. Meanwhile, the General Intelligence Bureau (GIB) is officially responsible for addressing external threats like espionage

¹³ Emphasis added.

¹⁴ South Sudan, *National Security Service Act, 2014*, art. 160.

¹⁵ South Sudan, *National Security Service Act, 2014*, art. 10.

and terrorism. However, the ISB has also been involved in monitoring South Sudanese citizens abroad, with alarming reports and evidence of abductions and disappearances of political dissidents in neighbouring countries.¹⁶ The NSS is estimated to have 40,915 staff members on its official payroll and thousands more operatives engaged by the agency for special duties according to a senior staff member of the NSS and a news report.¹⁷ The agency reports directly to the President with a separate command and control structure. Additionally, it has its own training facilities, tanks, weapons, surveillance systems and armour.

As the political crisis of 2013 was accelerating, President Kiir strengthened the agency to serve as a counterweight to any loyalty and influence that opposing SPLA generals still had within the SPLA's rank and file. Previous integrations of forces during the CPA years had inserted vast numbers of Nuer soldiers, diluting what had been a Dinka domination of the army and the security units. As the civil war unfolded in 2014 the influence of general Paul Malong grew as Chief of General Staff of the SPLA. Malong was also the principal advisor of military strategy to the President until 2017. As Malong's power grew fears of further breakaway units within the SPLA or internal movements for a military coup to depose Kiir, led the President to further strengthen the NSS as a counterpower. In July 2018, Malong was sanctioned by the UN Security Council for several international crimes and his role in undermining the peace agreement of 2015 and the efforts to hunt and kill the VP Riek Machar in July 2016. In 2019 the UN Panel of experts observed that the NSS was better equipped and trained than the army and was in effect an "autonomous force capable of influencing South Sudan's politics, society and economy".

Even after independence, Sudan's intelligence service NISS played a significant

role in shaping South Sudan's security apparatus by training several batches of South Sudanese recruits between 2006 and 2011. Its methods influenced the emerging NSS, shaping its training protocols and its overarching philosophy, strategic outlook, and operational tactics, and fostering a militarised model that integrated policing and military functions. This emphasis on rapid response and regime protection over civilian oversight and accountability echoed the Sudanese intelligence blueprint and cemented a structure with blurred lines of authority. In Sudan, the NISS operated as the regime's chief instrument of repression, employing an array of brutal measures—ranging from torture and enforced disappearances to the orchestration of armed rebellions—to suppress dissent. This legacy, in turn, guided the NSS in adopting similar patterns of intimidation and violence against civilians. Through this deeply entrenched culture of fear and domination, the NISS's example set the stage for the NSS to become an equally feared and ruthless institution, mirroring its predecessor's authoritarian ethos. The leadership of Salah Gosh was central to the NISS's transformation into a more violently repressive apparatus. As NISS director, Gosh deepened the agency's reliance on terror, contributing directly to the horrors of the early 2000s Darfur conflict by arming Janjaweed militias notorious for systematic killings, mass rape, and forced displacement. The tactics he introduced—extrajudicial detentions, torture, and the intimidation of journalists, activists, and political opponents—modelled an uncompromising approach to control that would later inform and embolden the NSS's methods. Under Gosh, the NISS worked systematically to crush dissent, empower proxy forces, manipulate security threats, and negotiate impunity with foreign intelligence agencies—tactics that not only suppressed political opposition but also entrenched authoritarian governance in Sudan.

16 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises: Arbitrary Detention by South Sudan's Intelligence Agencies Continues*, Index AFR 65/8823/2018 (2018).

17 "SSP182 billion set aside for security sector in 2023–2024 budget," *Radio Tamazuj*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/ssp182-billion-set-aside-for-security-sector-in-2023-2024-budget>.

While the atrocities attracted international scrutiny, Gosh's strategic manoeuvres demonstrated how an intelligence agency could operate beyond domestic accountability. By covertly cooperating with western intelligence services, Gosh shielded both himself and the regime from immediate repercussions. This model of negotiating impunity—balancing extreme internal repression with selective external engagement—provided a blueprint for the NSS. It learned from NISS's example how to wield domestic and international influence, protecting itself and its leadership from the consequences of its actions. When Gosh resumed the NISS directorship in 2018, he reasserted the same brutal playbook against new waves of anti-regime protesters, deploying lethal force and violent reprisals. Although public outrage eventually contributed to the fall of President Omar al-Bashir's dictatorship, the endurance of NISS tactics—such as militarised crowd control and the targeting of demonstrators—reinforced the principles of state coercion that the NSS would later emulate in its context.

Just as Salah Gosh leveraged the NISS's institutional might to enforce regime dominance through brutality, intimidation, and strategic alliances, Akol Koor similarly shaped the NSS into a formidable apparatus of state control. Koor's leadership of the NSS mirrored these methods in South Sudan, adopting harsh surveillance measures, arbitrary detention, and targeted violence against perceived adversaries. Much like Gosh, Koor ensured that loyalty to the regime took precedence over the rule of law or civil rights, thereby securing the NSS as a powerful instrument of coercion. In both cases, Gosh and Koor demonstrated how strongmen at the helm of an intelligence service could replicate oppressive models, transform security sectors into personal power bases, and maintain regimes through fear, loyalty, and the relentless suppression of opposition. Even after Gosh's resignation and exile, the

lingering effects of his tenure underscored the durability of the NISS's repressive framework. Loyal security agents resisted efforts to hold him accountable, threatening law enforcement with heavy weaponry and illustrating how entrenched these methods had become within Sudan's security sector. International sanctions against Gosh and subsequent warrants for his arrest further highlighted the global recognition of NISS's crimes. Yet, by then, the agency's methods—steeped in brutality, coercion, and impunity—had set a precedent. This legacy would resonate within the NSS, which absorbed the NISS's comprehensive lessons on surveillance, intimidation, and extrajudicial violence, ultimately shaping the South Sudanese service's identity and institutional conduct on all fronts. Despite the NISS's eventual rebranding as the General Intelligence Service (GIS) and the dispersal of its members, the spectre of Gosh's influence persisted. In January 2020, a mutiny by former NISS officers—described by top military leaders as orchestrated by Gosh—demonstrated the lingering capacity for violence and sabotage he built into Sudan's security infrastructure a lesson South Sudan might just have learnt after the removal of Koor.¹⁸

Article 13 of the National Security Service Act 2014 grants the NSS far-ranging powers, including monitoring, investigating, gathering intelligence, preventing threats, providing security advice, protecting key figures, detaining suspects and seizing properties. Despite these broad powers, an amendment to grant further powers to the NSS entered into force in 2024. This amendment allows the NSS to monitor suspected persons and places, awards it powers to arrest and detain beyond the confines of national security crimes, and legalises pre-emptive actions to detect and prevent threats.¹⁹ The amendment process of the 2014 NSS Act, started shortly after the signing of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), and unfolded

18 Andrew McGregor, "Salah Gosh and the survival of Sudan's old regime," *Jamestown Foundation*, February 4, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/brief/salah-gosh-and-the-survival-of-sudans-old-regime/>.

19 *Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)*, section 10.

against a backdrop of fragile peace and a delicate political transition. The R-ARCSS agreement aimed to restore stability by reintegrating opposition figures, forming a unity government and introducing measures to address the mistrust that remained high among political factions.

In this context, the amendment of the NSS Act, which expanded the powers of the already controversial security service, sparked concerns about the government's commitment to genuine reform. The timing

also suggested a strategy to consolidate control over dissent, as the NSS gained enhanced authority just as prominent opposition leaders were returning to the country, raising fears of continued political repression despite the peace process. This development signalled a reluctance to demilitarise state governance. It posed a significant challenge to the peace process by entrenching an apparatus perceived as a counterweight to any form of power sharing, security sector reform and accountable government.



An overview of South Sudan Security Sector

SHADOW STRUCTURES OF POWER

South Sudan's security apparatus consists of several interlinked agencies that work together to maintain the state's power, with the NSS being the most prominent.

The NSS's role overlaps with those of other entities, such as military intelligence and elite units like the Tiger Battalion, which is part of the Presidential Guard. Known for their brutal methods, these military units often engage in arbitrary detentions and torture, especially targeting civilians based on political or ethnic affiliations.²⁰ Reports of unofficial detention centres operated by powerful military generals indicate a parallel network of repression where individuals are held without due process.²¹ The legal boundaries between these agencies are often blurred, leading to overlapping mandates and roles. While military intelligence is supposed to focus on defence-related intelligence, its activities frequently overlap with the NSS, especially in domestic surveillance and counterintelligence against perceived political threats. Similarly, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), legally responsible for investigating criminal activities, is often overshadowed by the NSS, which intervenes in politically sensitive cases despite lacking a clear mandate for law enforcement. This results in jurisdictional conflicts and erodes the rule of law. The combined effects of the operations of these agencies create an insurmountable barrier to peace and prospects of democracy in South Sudan.

In addition to the immense formal powers granted to the NSS by the Constitution and its governing laws, disturbing reports reveal that the agency has created shadowy and lethal structures outside formal chains of command.²² These structures are reportedly

used to carry out 'jungle' justice, settle personal vendettas, and incite or fund inter- and intra-tribal conflicts, thereby deepening societal divisions.²³ This chaos serves the dual purpose of entrenching fear among the population while making the regime even more dependent on the NSS for survival, ensuring its unchecked authority. Senior current and former government officials have alleged that shadowy, lethal structures within NSS operate under a system of covert, ruthless operations with direct ties to top officials. Among these structures is the infamous group of 'unknown gunmen', widely feared for conducting extrajudicial killings with total impunity. Another group, known as Achol and led by Angelo Kuot, reportedly takes direct orders from General Akol Koor, illustrating the deep entanglement between official security forces and illicit, often brutal, operations. Koor, a close confidant of President Salva Kiir and a prominent figure from Warrap State played a pivotal role in shaping the NSS into a powerful, feared agency. As the first director of the Internal Security Bureau (ISB), he moulded the NSS into an institution known for extensive surveillance, arbitrary detentions, and extrajudicial actions, effectively transforming it into a repressive arm of the regime used to suppress political dissent and extract resources for elite interests. This unchecked authority of the NSS under Koor's influence underscores how deeply embedded repression and corruption have become within South Sudan's security framework.

20 United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Armed Violence Involving Community-Based Militias in Greater Jonglei: January – August 2020* (March 2021).

21 Interview with two former senior government officials with knowledge of these ungazetted detention places.

22 Interview with a serving senior government official with knowledge of the subject matter.

23 Interview with a former senior government official with knowledge of the subject matter.

The Awan Group, initially established by Gen. Paul Malong Awan, then Chief of General Staff, is another entity within these rogue networks. Often associated with units such as Mathiang Anyoor, the Awan Group consists of fighters primarily from the Dinka ethnic group and remains stationed at the Presidential Palace, commonly known as 'J1.' Under the command of Atak Deng, this group is notorious for extrajudicial executions, torture, and other forms of degrading treatment against perceived opposition figures and civil society activists. The group's brutality is well-documented, particularly in the 2013 mass killing of ethnic Nuer civilians in Juba, which escalated into a devastating civil war. The Awan Group, created by Gen. Paul Malong Awan, includes fighters from the Dinka ethnic group and gained notoriety during the 2013 massacre of ethnic Nuers, reflecting the brutal militarization of ethnic divisions in the ongoing conflict. Despite the nominal authority of the Minister of Security over these units, the minister's influence is severely limited; fully aware of these rogue elements but unable to rein them in. This powerless position starkly highlights the degree to which the NSS operates autonomously, beyond the control of official state mechanisms, and acts as an unrestrained enforcer for South Sudan's ruling elite. The alleged direct involvement of senior officials, including General Akol Koor, in commanding these hitmen squads suggests that the NSS is not merely a security institution but a parallel state actor capable of manipulating violence for political purposes.

The NSS's use of such shadow networks also points to the broader dysfunction within the government, where official institutions are sidelined, and rogue elements are empowered to act with impunity. This erosion of formal governance structures weakens the state's capacity to uphold justice and entrenches the NSS as the ultimate arbiter of power in South Sudan. The result is a regime

that relies on coercion and intimidation rather than on democratic legitimacy, further fuelling instability. This complete integration of the NSS into South Sudan's broader political power play deeply entrenches it in the patronage system that sustains the political, economic and security systems of South Sudan.²⁴ The NSS, therefore, like other security institutions in South Sudan functions as an instrument of political control rather than a neutral body dedicated to national security.

This political integration allows the NSS to operate as a dual weapon: on the one hand, it advances the personal political ambitions of its senior leaders, who use its covert structures like the 'unknown gunmen' and hitmen groups to eliminate rivals, settle scores, and accumulate power and enormous wealth. On the other hand, it serves as a critical tool for the regime's broader political control, festering and nourishing a lucrative patronage system, suppressing dissent, terrorising opposition, and fuelling inter- and intra-communal conflicts to maintain a state of fear and dependence.²⁵ This dual role ensures that while the regime remains in power through repression, key figures within the NSS solidify their political ambitions and dominance, making the security apparatus both indispensable and insidious. This deepens societal fractures, obstructs the formation of a cohesive national identity, and perpetuates cycles of violence and authoritarianism that hinder prospects for reconciliation and sustainable governance.

In a post-conflict state like South Sudan, patronage is the lifeblood of power, binding the military, security forces, and political elite in a web of personal loyalties. This system is crucial for maintaining control of President Salva Kiir and his inner circle. Key appointments within the NSS and other security structures are based not on merit but on allegiance to the regime. This deeply

24 Claudia Breitung, Wolf-Christian Paes, and Luuk van de Vondervoort, "In Need of a Critical Re-Think: Security Sector Reform in South Sudan" (report, 2016), 31.

25 Human Rights Watch, "What Crime Was I Paying For?" *Abuses by South Sudan's National Security Service* (2021).

entrenched patronage ensures that the NSS serves not only as an instrument of state control but also as a mechanism for distributing rewards and consolidating the power of those closest to the presidency. Consequently, national interests are often subordinated to personal networks, further entrenching instability and undermining the possibility of genuine governance reform.

South Sudan's governance system thrives on exclusionary politics and ethnic balkanisation, deeply embedding divisions that have become essential for regime stability.²⁶ The NSS has been instrumental in leveraging these dynamics to consolidate power. By employing targeted repression, the NSS exploits ethnic rivalries and fosters loyalty through fear and intimidation. These divisions are mirrored in the agency's operational methods, which include ethnic profiling and the strategic use of violence to suppress communities deemed threats to the regime.

The NSS also wields substantial influence over the country's economy through a complex web of state-aligned businesses and front companies. Most of the country's budget (85%) comes from oil money, making it a vital lifeline for the economy.²⁷ Investigations by human rights organisations and financial watchdogs—most notably The Sentry—have uncovered multiple enterprises linked to the NSS, forming a shadowy commercial empire designed to generate revenue and enhance the agency's autonomy. The Sentry found that 50 NSS officers held between them stakes in 125 companies operating in several sectors including oil, mining,

agriculture, telecommunications, publishing, aviation, logistics, import and export, and procurement.²⁸ Central to these operations is a cluster of firms operating under the 'Nile Basin' umbrella, where General Akol Koor has a seat on the Board of Directors. This network includes, among others, **Nile Basin for Aviation**, which provides both commercial and logistical air services; **Nile Basin for Business and Trade**, reportedly engaged in importing essential commodities and negotiating lucrative supply contracts; **Nile Basin for Roads and Bridges**, allegedly linked to infrastructure projects; and **Nile Basin for Engineering and Construction**, which may undertake building and development initiatives. Additionally, there are indications that **Nile Basin for Investment** and other similarly named subsidiaries are active in general commerce, resource extraction, and potential telecommunications ventures. However, details on their specific activities and ownership structures remain murky.²⁹ Additionally, NSS personnel were found to occupy key posts across state institutions like the National Revenue Authority, as well as in tax collection, banking and foreign exchange, allowing it strategic control of the financial sector.³⁰

According to the UN panel of experts 2019 report, the NSS controls two security companies – Sudd Security Services co. Ltd and Investment Co. Ltd that have privileged access to government contracts to protect the country's oilfields. These operations allow the NSS to also benefit directly from oil revenues in the form of payments for transportation, accommodation, food and

26 Roque and Miamingji, *Beyond ARCISS*, 15.

27 "Fuel to the Fire: EU Banks and Investors Tied to Violence in South Sudan," *Global Witness*, November 2023.

28 "Undercover Activities: Inside the National Security Service's Profitable Playbook," *The Sentry*, December 2022.

29 Amnesty International, *Don't We Matter? Four Years of Unrelenting Attacks Against Civilians in South Sudan* (2017); *Global Witness, Defenders of the Land & the Future: A New Era of Resistance in the Oil-Producing Areas of South Sudan* (2018), <https://www.globalwitness.org>; Douglas H. Johnson, *South Sudan: A New History for a New Nation* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016); *The Sentry, The Taking of South Sudan: The Tycoons, Brokers, and Multinational Corporations Complicit in Hijacking the World's Newest State* (September 2019), <https://cdn.thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/TakingOfSouthSudan-Sept2019-TheSentry.pdf>; *The Sentry, Making a Killing: South Sudanese Military Leaders' Wealth, Explained* (June 2021), <https://cdn.thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/MakingAKilling-TheSentry-June2021.pdf>.

30 "Undercover Activities: Inside the National Security Service's Profitable Playbook," *The Sentry*, December 2022.

other personnel expenses worth millions of dollars. In 2015 the oil company's revenues were used to fund the presence of over 100,000 soldiers in the field, with inflated numbers of over 210,000 'ghost soldiers' used to divert funds to over 700 generals.³¹ Oil money was also found to be used to purchase weapons, in contravention to the UN arms embargo and to support the operations of government aligned militias.³² The security and rule of law sectors combined a disproportionate amount of the state's resources, that in the 2022/2023 financial year amounted to US\$675.6 million, to fund over 420,000 security personnel, dwarfing the amounts spent on health and humanitarian sectors that amounted to less than US\$76.8 million.

By controlling these strategically diversified companies, the NSS secures significant economic clout. Its dominance in such sectors allows it to influence market prices, supply chains, and even currency availability, exerting leverage well beyond the traditional security sphere. Some of these businesses are believed to operate with minimal transparency, obscuring actual ownership and operations. Critics argue that the profits from these entities can easily be channelled back into the NSS, financing repression and limiting the prospects for democratic reforms. Documents compiled and interviews conducted by investigative journalists and non-governmental organisations suggest that these NSS-linked enterprises exploit the absence of strong regulatory frameworks and oversight mechanisms, using political connections to access state resources and sidestep accountability. As revenue streams from oil, aviation, construction, and general trade flow into NSS coffers, the agency can strengthen its surveillance apparatus, expand

its operational footprint, and perpetuate patronage networks. Ultimately, the nexus between the NSS and these companies poses significant challenges to governance, transparency, and human rights in South Sudan. Without comprehensive reforms to sever security agencies from commercial interests, the NSS's economic empire will likely continue to shape the country's political and economic landscape, undermining peace-building efforts and the development of accountable institutions.

In October 2024, President Salva Kiir dismissed General Akol Koor Kuc from his long-held position as Director of the ISB within the NSS, appointing Lieutenant General Akec Tong Aleu as his successor. The sacking sparked various speculations. Some analysts suggest that the move reflects internal power struggles within the government, possibly due to disagreements between Kiir and Koor over the country's direction. Others believe the dismissal aims to address international criticism of the NSS's human rights record under Koor's leadership. Additionally, there are rumours that the removal was a strategic decision to prevent potential coup attempts. Koor was perceived to have amassed significant power and influence within the security apparatus.³³ However, this change in leadership is unlikely to alter the entrenched culture and fundamental purpose of the NSS, which is to maintain a climate of fear and silence in the country. A few days following Akol Koor's sacking as the ISB's Director, a fight broke out at his residence. It is difficult to ascertain the factors behind the gunfight. The gunfight could likely have stemmed from immediate power vacuums allowing those who have personal vendettas against General Koor to act. It could also have been fuelled by real

31 "The First Collateral of War: The State Budget," *Africa Intelligence*, March 2015..

32 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts for South Sudan*, January 26, 2016.

33 "Kiir Sacks Gen. Akol Koor as Head of NSS, Names Replacement," *Sudan's Post*, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.sudanspost.com/kiir-sacks-gen-akol-koor-as-head-of-nss-names-replacement/>; "Kiir Ousts Veteran National Security Chief Gen. Akol Koor Over Power Struggle," *The Juba Mirror*, October 3, 2024, <https://thejubamirror.com/2024/10/03/kiir-ousts-veteran-national-security-chief-gen-akol-koor-over-power-struggle/>; "Kiir Revokes Gen. Akol Koor's Appointment as Warrap Governor," *Sudan's Post*, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.sudanspost.com/kiir-revokes-gen-akol-koors-appointment-as-warrap-governor>.

or perceived threats among loyalist guards, rumours of countermeasures Koor and his loyalists might have been planning against his house arrest, and unresolved grievances between rival security factions.

The implications of this violence are profound: it highlights the fragility of internal cohesion within South Sudan's security

apparatus, undermines confidence in the chain of command, and casts doubt on the government's ability to enforce orderly transitions of power. This episode, in turn, may encourage other actors to respond to political setbacks with violence, impeding efforts toward institutional reforms, consolidating peace, and fostering long-term stability in the country.

OPERATIONAL METHODS AND INTELLIGENCE-GATHERING TOOLS

The NSS employs a range of operational methods and intelligence-gathering tools aimed at maintaining control over the population and maintaining the regime's grip on power.

These tactics, inherited from Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and informed by Ethiopia's military intelligence ethos of the 1980s, are deployed domestically and internationally to monitor, intimidate, and silence those perceived as threats to the state. The agency uses a combination of digital surveillance, a network of informers, arbitrary detention, interrogations and torture, physical raids, and extraterritorial operations to target political dissidents, human rights activities, journalists, and civil society groups.³⁴ By leveraging its extensive network and collaborating with other state and foreign entities, the NSS has entrenched a climate of fear that stifles free expression, limits political engagement, and violates human rights.³⁵ The following sections explore the various repressive tactics used by the NSS, detailing their impact on South Sudanese society and beyond.

A significant part of the NSS's activities involves silencing critics of the government,

particularly journalists, human rights defenders, opposition members, and civil society activists. Under the guise of 'national security', the NSS monitors, arrests, and detains individuals without due process, often subjecting them to prolonged periods of detention without formal charges.³⁶ The NSS carries out arbitrary and incommunicado detentions, torture, and utilises 'ghost houses'—clandestine sites used for illegal detentions—without judicial oversight. Many detainees are subjected to severe mistreatment at notorious detention facilities, including the 'Blue House' in Juba, NSS Riverside, Gyiada Military Barracks, and the Gorom military base. The detainees are typically held in undisclosed locations, denied access to legal representation, and subjected to torture and other forms of inhumane treatment.³⁷ The notorious 'Blue House' detention facility in Juba has become symbolic of the NSS's human rights abuses, with numerous reports of torture and deaths in custody.

34 "South Sudan: Reform Abusive Security Agency," *Human Rights Watch*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/19/south-sudan-reform-abusive-security-agency>.

35 Amnesty International, *Chilling Effect of Surveillance: South Sudan's National Security Service's Abusive Monitoring and Suppression of Activism* (2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr65/3577/2021/en/>.

36 Interview with a senior NSS official, interviewed in preparation for this report.

37 Interview with a senior government official, conducted for this report.

Surveillance and monitoring:

The NSS employs a wide range of communication surveillance technologies to track the activities of individuals who are critical of the government. This includes intercepting phone calls, monitoring social media platforms, and using spyware to infiltrate personal communications.³⁸ Surveillance is not limited to individuals within South Sudan; members of the South Sudanese diaspora (including this author), particularly those involved in activism or opposition movements, are also monitored. By keeping activists under constant surveillance, the NSS creates an environment in which individuals are forced to self-censor, knowing that state agents are scrutinising their private communications and actions. This surveillance apparatus enables the NSS to pre-emptively identify and neutralise potential threats to the government. Individuals suspected of organising protests, documenting human rights abuses, or speaking out against the regime are often targeted for arbitrary arrest, detention, or harassment, sometimes before they have taken any overt actions. As a result, the surveillance network acts as both a repressive mechanism and a tool for pre-emptive control, ensuring that opposition movements are fragmented and isolated before they can gain momentum.

Techniques used by the NSS include phone tapping, intercepting electronic communications, and deploying a network of informants.³⁹ The organisation's operatives frequently attend public events, protests, and civil society meetings, where they gather intelligence on participants to pre-emptively identify and neutralise opposition.⁴⁰ This tactic extends beyond merely collecting information to actively interfering in events.

The climate of fear generated by the NSS's surveillance practices extends beyond activists and opposition members. Journalists and civil society organisations are also frequent targets, leading to widespread self-censorship within the media and civil society. Journalists have been particularly vulnerable, with many opting not to report on sensitive issues such as government corruption, human rights violations, or the activities of the NSS itself for fear of retaliation. Those who engage with foreign journalists or international organisations have been flagged and often detained on accusations of "spreading false information" or "collaborating with foreign enemies."⁴¹ Foreigners are not exempt from this control and are monitored closely with infiltration occurring at all levels from NGO personnel to the bugging of hotel rooms. Intelligence officers are planted across private and public companies to determine their levels of loyalty, threat and political inclinations. Likewise, NSS personnel spans the country across ethnic groups and within local communities to monitor and report on local leaders.

While the software used by NSS has not been publicly named, according to senior former and present government officials and NSS officials, the following software could be in use in South Sudan: Pegasus by NSO Group, Circles by NSO Group, PSS (Passive Security Solutions) by Verint and also Trovicor Intelligence Platform and NiceTrack by NICE Systems.⁴² These surveillance tools are incredibly dangerous. *Pegasus*, as is widely known, can infect mobile phones remotely, often via 'zero-click exploits', without the user knowing their device is infected. Devices instantly become mobile surveillance tools used as a weapon against anyone defined as a threat to the state. *Circles* on the other hand exploits weaknesses in

38 Interview with a senior NSS official, conducted for this report.

39 Amnesty International, "South Sudan: Revise National Security Service Bill," *Amnesty International*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org>.

40 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Entrenched Repression: Systematic Curtailment of the Democratic and Civic Space in South Sudan*, A/HRC/54/CRP.6, October 5, 2023.

41 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Entrenched Repression*.

42 Interview with a former minister with direct knowledge, conducted for this report.

the global mobile phone system to listen in on calls, read texts, and find the location of phones. Circles customers can connect to their local telecommunications companies' infrastructure, or can use a separate system called the 'Circles Cloud,' which interconnects with telecommunications companies around the world.⁴³ The NSS collaborates with telecommunications companies to access private communications, often bypassing legal procedures. This partnership facilitates extensive monitoring of individuals' communications, enabling the NSS to disrupt planned activities and control the flow of information. The ruling SPLM party owned a stake in Vivacell Telecom before it was shutdown and allegedly pay Verint at least \$762,236 in order to intercept citizens' communications.⁴⁴ In 2021 President Salva Kiir launched the newest operator, Digital making this link even more incestuous. German company *Trovicor* sells internet monitoring products that empower governments to anticipate, prevent, manage and investigate incidents, and to recognise criminal intent. It also provides tools for online bulk surveillance. *Nice Track* also allows for mass data collection, interfacing with all cellular networks therefore allowing it to locate anyone, anytime, anywhere. If NSS is using this bouquet of interception and surveillance systems it has built itself an expensive, intrusive and omnipresent arsenal of cyber tools that allows it to fully control society.

Additionally, the NSS employs profiling based on information gathered through surveillance to target individuals deemed hostile to the government. Activists identified in this manner face increased harassment, arbitrary detention, or threats, further discouraging participation in advocacy and civil society activities. The UN report cited above provides specific examples of journalists and activists targeted by the National Security Service

(NSS) under false accusations. For instance, in August 2022, journalist Diing Magot was detained by plain-clothed security officers in Juba after interviewing student activists. She was accused of being a foreign spy and held for eight days without charges, during which she experienced ill-treatment. Another notable case is that of political reporter Woja Emmanuel, who was abducted at gunpoint in March 2022 by individuals suspected to be NSS agents. He was taken to a secret location, forced to ingest a toxic substance, and later fled the country after narrowly escaping an apparent assassination attempt. These incidents illustrate the NSS's use of fabricated charges to suppress dissent and silence independent voices in South Sudan.

Informants and Human Intelligence (HUMINT)

The NSS operates a pervasive network of informants within opposition groups, civil society, and local communities extending across newsrooms, printing presses, and civil society. Using this network of informants and operations, the NSS is able to extend its reach beyond mere editorial oversight; it dictates content through direct involvement in media production, leaving journalists and civil society actors in constant fear of retaliation to controlling workshops that can be organised. The NSS decide who can attend these workshops and what agenda can be discussed.⁴⁵ The use of these informants in the media sector, for example has resulted in widespread self-censorship, with many media outlets pre-emptively avoiding stories that could attract government scrutiny or provoke harassment and attacks. Within newsrooms, NSS officers wield significant power, often reviewing content before publication and issuing directives to alter, remove, or completely withhold material, in particular critical coverage of the government and topics like corruption, human rights abuses,

43 Scott-Railton Marczak et al., *Running in Circles: Uncovering the Clients of Cyberespionage Firm Circles*, Citizen Lab Research Report No. 133, University of Toronto, December 2020, <https://citizenlab.ca>.

44 Amnesty International, "South Sudan: Rampant Abusive Surveillance by NSS Instils Climate of Fear," *Amnesty International*, February 2021.

45 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Entrenched Repression*.

and security matters. Refusal to comply has led to severe consequences for media outlets, including suspension or closure, as evidenced by multiple incidents between 2021 and 2023 where journalists were summoned, threatened with detention, or had their publications shut down. The Media Authority, which ostensibly regulates the press, operates as an extension of the NSS's censorship apparatus.⁴⁶ The coordination between these two bodies ensures that any news coverage perceived as critical of the government is quickly suppressed.

Censorship extends beyond newsrooms, with civil society activities also tightly controlled. The NSS requires prior authorisation for all events, including workshops and public meetings, forcing organisers to submit detailed information such as agendas, participant lists, and even project budgets.⁴⁷ This clearance system is arbitrary and lacks any legal foundation, with refusals often occurring without explanation or at the last minute, disrupting planned activities.⁴⁸ Events that touch on sensitive topics, particularly human rights and accountability, are frequently denied approval. Even when authorisation is granted, NSS officers often attend to monitor proceedings, photographing participants at events, collecting personal data, and monitoring speeches for 'sensitive' content adding a layer of intimidation that discourages open discussion.⁴⁹ The consequences of this censorship regime are far-reaching, particularly for civil society actors who risk having their organisations' bank accounts frozen as a form of punishment for their activities. This tactic was notably employed in 2021, when several civil society groups experienced financial blockades as retaliation for their political work. The NSS froze the bank accounts of these activists and their organisations, creating another layer of control of their activities and opinions. This approach not only curtails free expression but also instils

a pervasive fear of reprisal, causing many civil society members to self-censor even in private forums. Informants are placed strategically in public places to record conversations. A recent example was the arrest of the former Juba City Council Mayor that was taken by the NSS on the 30th of March 2024. He was charged with conspiracy and subverting the constitutional government after a conversation of his was recorded. He was released after six months without facing trial. The chilling effect of the NSS's censorship and surveillance network severely limits public discourse and undermines the fundamental right to freedom of speech in South Sudan.

Physical raids, Arbitrary detention and interrogation:

The NSS conducts violent, warrantless raids on homes and offices of suspected anti-government individuals. These raids resulted in the destruction of property, confiscation of documents, and arbitrary arrests, particularly in Juba. The agency frequently resorts to arbitrary detentions as a method of controlling dissent, often detaining individuals without formal charges, legal representation, or access to the outside world. Detainees are commonly held at illegal detention centres like the notorious 'Blue House' in Juba, where they endure harsh conditions, including torture and inhumane treatment. These practices aim to silence opposition, discourage dissent, and maintain state control through fear and repression. The use of arbitrary detention has become particularly pronounced since the outbreak of the conflict in December 2013, targeting those perceived as aligned with opposition forces. In many cases, detainees are accused of trying to 'spoil the government' without evidence or due process. The NSS's pattern of arbitrary detention is well-documented, particularly against activists, journalists, and individuals associated with international organisations. For example, journalist Woja

46 Interview with a former minister with knowledge of NSS operations, conducted for this report.

47 Interview with a retired military general with knowledge of NSS operations, conducted for this report.

48 Interview with a senior NSS official currently serving in the ISB Directorate of the NSS.

49 Interview with a senior NSS official, conducted for this report.

Emmanuel was abducted at gunpoint in 2022, taken to a 'ghost house', forced to drink a toxic substance, and narrowly escaped an apparent attempt on his life. Furthermore, individuals engaging with international bodies such as the United Nations have faced arbitrary detention and torture, as seen in the case of a person detained after raising issues of sexual violence with a UN delegation. Such acts of retaliation illustrate the NSS's efforts to deter scrutiny of the government's human rights record. Conditions at the 'Blue House' reflect the broader abuse of power by the NSS, where detainees are held in inhumane conditions and denied access to medical treatment, legal counsel, or their families.

Conditions within NSS detention centres are appalling. Reports from Amnesty International describe how detainees are often confined to cramped, overcrowded, and poorly ventilated cells, or even shipping containers, with little access to the outside. "Detainees are fed a monotonous diet of beans and posho," with some days passing without food at all, and most detainees sleep on the floor. One detainee, Joseph, recalls, "They stripped us and removed our clothes and then started beating us." Another detainee, Moses, recounted being tortured with sticks and metal poles: "They put me under gunpoint...they came with ropes and they started to beat me." Gatluak, who was

detained for over two years, shared how guards derisively told detainees, "You are rebels and you do not deserve to be treated as you want...you must die in prisons."⁵⁰

NSS practices are also marked by ethnic targeting, with individuals from certain groups being singled out for more severe treatment. A survivor described being "beaten, stripped, and forced to dance naked in front of government soldiers."⁵¹ Testimonies also reveal the widespread use of sexual violence, including rape and genital torture, against male detainees. Wiyual was tortured with needles piercing his testicles while being interrogated.⁵² Similarly, Michin was tortured at Bilpham Military Barracks with methods that included twisting his fingers, inserting burning matchsticks into his anus, and genital mutilation.⁵³ The Gyiada Military Barracks is infamous for fatalities resulting from beatings, untreated illnesses, and torture, with detainees alleging that bodies were sometimes left in cells for over 24 hours. Torture is a standard method used by the NSS to extract information or force confessions. Survivors of NSS detention have reported being subjected to beatings, electric shocks, mock executions, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. A report by the Human Rights Watch cited widespread use of torture by the NSS, often leading to long-term physical and mental trauma.

50 Amnesty International, "These Walls Have Ears": *The Chilling Effect of Surveillance in South Sudan* (Amnesty International, 2021).

51 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises: Arbitrary Detention by South Sudan's Intelligence Agencies Continues*, Index: AFR 65/8823/2018 (Amnesty International, 2018).

52 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises*, Index: AFR 65/8823/2018 (Amnesty International, 2018).

53 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises*, Index: AFR 65/8823/2018 (Amnesty International, 2018).

TRAINING, EQUIPMENT, AND INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

The rise of the NSS in South Sudan as a formidable instrument of repression has not occurred in isolation. Despite international sanctions and a formal arms embargo by the United Nations, the NSS has been able to access training, equipment, and financial backing from several foreign actors, allowing it to expand its role in state control and regional destabilisation, enabling it to execute its notorious campaigns of surveillance, intimidation, and violence with impunity.

Several countries have allegedly played a role in either strengthening or closing their eyes to the operations of the NSS, and these include:

Israel's role in training and intelligence sharing:

One of the more controversial players alleged to support the NSS is Israel. In early 2016, Israeli human rights lawyer Eitay Mack and parliamentarian Tamar Zandberg filed a petition with the Israeli Supreme Court to halt the transfer of surveillance technology to South Sudan, arguing that it was being used to “track down, lock up, and torture political dissidents and journalists.”⁵⁴ The case was placed under a gag order, effectively preventing public discussion. A similar petition was filed in May 2017 by Mack and 54 other activists, seeking a criminal investigation into the export of arms to South Sudan, which was also met with a gag order. In August 2016, an Associated Press report linked the American-Israeli company Verint Systems to the supply of surveillance technology in South Sudan, citing evidence from former detainees who recalled hearing recordings of their intercepted communications during interrogations.

Further reports in 2018 by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* confirmed that Verint had supplied espionage

equipment to South Sudan, which was used in a monitoring centre.⁵⁵ Two former members of the UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan described visiting such a centre at Juba's Buluk Police Station, part of the ‘Smart City’ project launched in 2017.⁵⁶ While the project was publicly framed as a crime-fighting initiative using CCTV cameras and drones, it reportedly functioned in collaboration with the NSS to monitor military sites, UN compounds, and diplomatic areas rather than addressing crime. Additionally, a second monitoring centre operated inside the notorious ‘Blue House’, equipped with radio antennas believed to intercept communications, according to testimonies from former detainees and experts.

While the full extent of Israel's involvement remains ambiguous, reports suggest that Israeli security firms and personnel have provided advanced training to South Sudanese forces, likely extending to the NSS. This training, focused on intelligence gathering and counter-insurgency, aligns with the NSS's extensive surveillance operations. Israel's alleged support for South Sudan is driven by strategic interests in the region, particularly around intelligence cooperation and security in East Africa.

54 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises*, Index: AFR 65/8823/2018 (Amnesty International, 2018).

55 Interview with a senior NSS official currently serving in the ISB Directorate of the NSS.

56 Amnesty International, *“These Walls Have Ears”* (2021).

China's involvement in arms and surveillance technology: China's alleged role in bolstering the NSS has been particularly significant. Chinese companies have been implicated in providing surveillance technology, including drones, advanced monitoring systems, and facial recognition tools, all of which have enhanced the NSS's ability to track and suppress dissent both domestically and among South Sudanese dissidents living abroad. These tools have reportedly been used in cases of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of political activists and government critics. Additionally, Chinese arms manufacturers have supplied the NSS with weapons and equipment that have been instrumental in its operations against perceived threats to the regime, further entrenching the service's power.⁵⁷

These international collaborations have been instrumental in transforming the NSS into one of the most powerful institutions in South Sudan. Foreign military training, intelligence sharing, and advanced technology have enabled the NSS to suppress opposition, control civil society, and dominate the media. Furthermore, these partnerships have enhanced the NSS's operational capabilities and allowed the service to operate as a semi-autonomous entity, less reliant on formal government structures and more integrated into global networks of arms and technology transfers. Several countries have been involved in training South Sudan's security sector. The United States, United

Kingdom, and Norway—collectively known as the Troika—have played significant roles. The Troika has provided technical assistance and training to various components of South Sudan's security apparatus, including the military and police forces. Ethiopia's National Information and Security University and other training facilities in the country has a long history of training South Sudanese security officers, focusing on senior-level information and security leadership.

Additionally, regional organisations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have conducted training workshops on Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) policy frameworks, with participation from South Sudanese officials. While exact figures on the Troika's financial contributions to SSR in South Sudan are not readily available, their ongoing support underscores a commitment to enhancing the country's security sector capabilities. The involvement of foreign actors in training and equipping the NSS has both directly and indirectly contributed to the entrenchment of authoritarianism in South Sudan. These international collaborations have fortified the NSS's role in suppressing dissent, enforcing state control, and destabilising the broader region; as long as foreign governments and corporations continue to provide support, whether, for strategic, economic, or political reasons, the NSS will remain a formidable force in perpetuating the regime's grip on power and undermining efforts towards peace and democratic reform in South Sudan.

57 Gramer, Robbie. "How EU and Chinese Arms Diverted to South Sudan Fueled Its Civil War." *Foreign Policy*, November 29, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/29/how-eu-and-chinese-arms-diverted-to-south-sudan-fueled-its-civilwar-small-arms-warfare-east-africa-conflict-china-weapons-exports-humanitarian-crisis-juba-peace-deal-salvakiir/>.

CASE STUDIES OF TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

The NSS extends its repressive tactics beyond South Sudan's borders, targeting opposition figures, activists, and human rights defenders in neighbouring countries through illegal renditions, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings.

Since 2016, the agency conducted cross-border operations with the help of foreign security forces, as seen in the 2017 disappearances of human rights lawyer Dong Samuel Luak and opposition figure Aggrey Idri, who were abducted in Nairobi and later transferred to NSS custody in Juba.⁵⁸ The February 2023 abduction of South Sudanese critic Morris Mabior from Kenya and taken to the 'Blue House' and held under harsh conditions further highlights the ongoing nature of these extraterritorial operations.⁵⁹ Most of the extraterritorial operations of the NSS target individuals that have criticised the government, exposing human rights abuses or expressing support for the opposition. The following case studies illustrate the extent of the NSS's reach and its blatant disregard for international law and human rights norms.

The Abduction and Killing of Dong Samuel Luak and Aggrey Idri:

One of the most well-documented and egregious examples of NSS repression was the enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killing of two prominent South Sudanese dissidents, Dong Samuel Luak and Aggrey Idri. Both men were outspoken critics of the South Sudanese government and active members of the opposition movement. Dong Samuel Luak, a prominent human rights lawyer and registered refugee, was a vocal critic of the South Sudanese government. He had fled to Nairobi, Kenya, where he sought asylum to avoid persecution by the NSS. Aggrey Idri, a senior member of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition

(SPLM-IO), was also living in exile in Nairobi, where he engaged in political activism against the regime of President Salva Kiir. On January 23, 2017, Dong Samuel Luak was forcibly taken from Nairobi, Kenya. The following day, Aggrey Ezbon Idri, a high-ranking member of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) and chair of its Humanitarian Affairs Committee, was also abducted under similar circumstances. These disappearances were not isolated incidents but part of a pattern of extraterritorial operations by the NSS, with credible evidence indicating the involvement of both South Sudanese and Kenyan security agencies.

Reports from Amnesty International and the United Nations Panel of Experts on South Sudan confirmed that Dong and Aggrey were secretly flown to South Sudan on January 27, 2017, aboard a commercial flight reportedly arranged by South Sudan's embassy in Kenya. Upon arrival in Juba, the two men were initially detained at the notorious 'Blue House', an NSS facility infamous for torture and extrajudicial killings. They were later moved to the NSS training centre on President Salva Kiir's private farm in Luri, where it is 'highly probable' that they were executed on January 30, 2017.⁶⁰ Despite persistent calls for transparency and justice by the families of the victims, human rights organisations, and the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, both the South Sudanese and Kenyan governments have provided little information or accountability regarding their fates.

58 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises* (2018).

59 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises* (2018).

60 Amnesty International, *"These Walls Have Ears": The Chilling Effect of Surveillance in South Sudan* (2021).

The chilling effect of these disappearances extends beyond South Sudan, influencing the activities of activists across neighbouring countries. Many South Sudanese exiles, especially those in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, have expressed fears about similar reprisals. One activist in Uganda remarked, “Kenya hands over activists. If I speak out about something, I could very well end up like them [Dong and Aggrey].”⁶¹ The cases underscore the pervasive threat to dissidents, even when they seek refuge abroad, forcing many to self-censor or remain silent about abuses in South Sudan. The pattern of cross-border abductions continued with the case of Morris Mabior, a South Sudanese teacher, former civil servant, and vocal government critic. On February 4, 2023, Mabior was abducted near his home in Nairobi and flown to Juba the following day. He was taken into custody by the NSS and detained at their headquarters, where numerous reports suggest he was subjected to torture, consistent with the agency’s notorious practices. As of September 2023, he remained in detention, with no access to legal representation or family, raising serious concerns about his health and safety. The rendition of Mabior, like that of Dong and Aggrey, involved apparent coordination between South Sudanese security forces and elements within the Kenyan police.⁶² Reports indicate that several officers participated in the raid of Mabior’s home, confiscating his belongings and threatening his wife to prevent her from speaking out.⁶³

Arbitrary detention and torture of Peter Biar Ajak:

Peter Biar Ajak, a prominent South Sudanese academic and activist, was arrested on July 28, 2018, at Juba International Airport by the National Security Service (NSS). His detention was widely viewed as a response to his vocal

criticism of the South Sudanese government and his role as the chairperson of the South Sudan Young Leaders Forum. Initially held without charges at the NSS headquarters, known as the ‘Blue House’, he endured poor detention conditions. He, along with five other men, was later accused of involvement in a prison uprising at the ‘Blue House’ on October 7, 2018, where detainees protested against poor conditions and lack of due process.

Following a trial marred by irregularities, harassment of defense lawyers, and a tense courtroom atmosphere dominated by NSS officers, Peter Biar Ajak was sentenced on June 11, 2019, to two years in prison for promoting public violence and disturbing the peace. The trial faced criticism from human rights groups, including Amnesty International, which described the proceedings as unfair. Ajak served his sentence at ‘Blue House’ under harsh conditions, highlighting the broader issues of arbitrary detention and repression in South Sudan. Sources interviewed for this report speculated that the harsh and irregular trial of Peter Biar Ajak in 2019, marked by intimidation from NSS officers, harassment of his defence, and ultimately a prison sentence served under severe conditions at the infamous ‘Blue House,’ may have contributed to his shift from a non-violent approach to allegedly more radical methods.

The enforced disappearance of James Gatdet Dak:

James Gatdet Dak, the official spokesman for Riek Machar’s SPLM-IO, was forcibly deported from Kenya to South Sudan in November 2016 despite being a registered refugee with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).⁶⁴ Gatdet lived in Nairobi, where he frequently criticised the

61 Amnesty International, *Broken Promises*, Index: AFR 65/8823/2018 (Amnesty International, 2018).

62 Amnesty International, *“These Walls Have Ears”: The Chilling Effect of Surveillance in South Sudan* (2021).

63 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan. *Entrenched Repression: Systematic Curtailment of the Democratic and Civic Space in South Sudan*. 5 Oct, 2023, A/HRC/54/CRP.6.

64 Human Rights Watch, *“What Crime Was I Paying For?” Abuses by South Sudan’s National Security Service* (2021).

South Sudanese government and supported Machar's opposition movement. Shortly after his deportation, Gatdet was arrested by the NSS and detained in the 'Blue House'. He was held for months without formal charges and reportedly tortured during his detention. In February 2018, Gatdet was sentenced to death

by a South Sudanese court on charges of treason, a decision that international human rights organisations widely condemned. Following sustained international pressure, Gatdet was released in November 2018 as part of a peace agreement.

IMPACT ON SOUTH SUDAN'S DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

As South Sudan strives to emerge from a history of conflict and authoritarianism, the NSS's unchecked powers represent a significant obstacle to developing an inclusive, transparent, and accountable democracy.

A fundamental requirement for any democracy is the existence of political pluralism, where multiple parties and voices can compete for power and contribute to governance without fear of retribution. However, the NSS, empowered by both the original NSS Act of 2014 and the NSS Amendment Act, has systematically targeted opposition figures, political activists, and critics of the ruling government. The agency's ability to arbitrarily arrest and detain individuals without due process has created a climate of fear, effectively silencing dissenting voices and weakening political opposition.⁶⁵ For instance, in the run-up to political events, the NSS frequently detains opposition members, preventing them from mobilising or participating in the democratic process.⁶⁶ By stifling opposition movements and preventing the formation of alternative political platforms, the NSS ensures that the ruling government, particularly under President Salva Kiir, remains in power unchallenged. Public participation in governance—through protests, petitions, or

civil society engagement—is a cornerstone of a healthy political system. Yet, the arbitrary powers of arrest and detention granted to the NSS have led to a systematic clampdown on public participation. Peaceful protests and demonstrations are frequently met with NSS crackdowns, with protesters detained without trial or legal representation. The Red Card Movement in 2019, a youth-led protest movement calling for governmental reforms, is a prime example of how the NSS uses intimidation and violence to stifle public engagement. In May 2019, NSS agents conducted house-to-house searches in Juba, targeting suspected RCM members, and deployed military forces to deter planned peaceful protests.⁶⁷ Additionally, in July 2019, three RCM members were arrested in Nairobi during a peaceful protest and charged with unlawful assembly, though the case was later withdrawn due to lack of evidence.⁶⁸

The expansive powers and operational methods of the NSS have had profound and detrimental effects on the rule of law in South

65 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Entrenched Repression*, 5 Oct. 2023.

66 Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Entrenched Repression*, 5 Oct. 2023.

67 Amnesty International, South Sudan: 'We are at risk and on the run' Security agents track down protesters (2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AFR6506922019ENGLISH.pdf>.

68 "Red Card Members Freed After Case Withdrawn," *Radio Tamazuj*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/red-card-members-freed-after-case-withdrawn>.

Sudan. By operating beyond constitutional boundaries and without accountability, the NSS has contributed to a culture of impunity and eroded the foundational principles of justice and governance.⁶⁹ Through arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings, the NSS has nullified key constitutional protections such as the right to due process, freedom from torture, and the right to a fair trial. The infamous 'Blue House' detention centre in Juba exemplifies these abuses, where detainees are held without charge for extended periods, subjected to inhumane conditions, and often denied access to legal representation. This undermining of the judicial process strips the courts of their authority and fosters a climate where state-sanctioned violence becomes normalised.

South Sudan's judicial system is characterised by a limited infrastructure, inadequate resources, and significant political interference, undermining its independence and effectiveness. Structurally, the judiciary is led by a Supreme Court and includes lower courts across states; however, many regions lack even basic court facilities, and judges often work without sufficient support staff, training, or secure environments. Political influence permeates the system, with reports of government and NSS interference in judicial decisions, particularly in cases involving dissent. Infiltration by political and security interests has eroded public trust, leading to a system where justice is inconsistently applied and the rule of law remains fragile. One of the most concerning aspects of the NSS's authority is its disregard for judicial oversight. The NSS Amendment Act mandates detainees must be brought before a court within 48 hours, but this provision is regularly flouted in practice. Detainees are often held incommunicado for extended periods, denied legal representation, and subjected to severe mistreatment. When the NSS invokes 'national security', the judiciary has limited capacity to challenge these abuses, effectively sidelining judicial intervention and

enabling prolonged, unlawful detentions. This failure to enforce legal standards erodes the judicial system's integrity and creates an environment where legal protections are easily circumvented.

The absence of accountability mechanisms within the NSS further exacerbates this issue. Courts often cannot prosecute NSS personnel for human rights violations, leading to a culture of impunity. NSS agents can act outside the law with little fear of consequences, operating as a de facto authority beyond judicial reach. The NSS's unchecked powers have also led to the systematic erosion of civil liberties in South Sudan. Rights such as free speech, freedom of assembly, and the right to a fair trial—enshrined in the Transitional Constitution and international human rights treaties—have been severely curtailed. The constant threat of surveillance, combined with arrests of dissenters, severely restricts citizens' ability to criticise the government or demand accountability. The legal framework governing the NSS has facilitated this erosion of rights and legal protections. The 2014 NSS Act and its amendments provide inadequate safeguards against abuse, allowing the agency to bypass judicial review. This has created a two-tiered legal system: NSS agents operate with impunity. At the same time, ordinary citizens are subjected to the full force of the law, often without the protections it guarantees. The dismantling of these critical legal protections undermines South Sudan's ability to build a just and equitable society, ensuring that the NSS remains a powerful, unaccountable force capable of perpetuating abuses with impunity.

Ineffective oversight mechanisms compound the NSS's ability to carry out such widespread surveillance. The failure of the National Security Council, the Minister, the President, the parliament, and the judiciary to exercise effective oversight over NSS is primarily rooted in the political and structural dynamics of the country's security apparatus. This

⁶⁹ Interview with a senior staff member of an intergovernmental organization based in Juba, along with several NGO and human rights defenders, conducted for this report.

power is bolstered by the NSS's role as a 'political police' force, loyal to the President and used to suppress opposition. Additionally, the militarisation of South Sudanese politics, where security forces such as the NSS are heavily intertwined with the ruling party (SPLM) and have deep-rooted connections to the military (SPLA), hinders independent oversight. The executive's grip on power, coupled with a lack of political will to reform the NSS or curtail its excesses, results in minimal parliamentary or judicial intervention.

This environment fosters a culture of impunity, where NSS abuses are met with little to no consequences, and legal reforms to limit its powers face significant resistance. There are no transparent regulations governing the NSS's use of surveillance technologies, and individuals subjected to surveillance have no legal recourse to challenge the intrusion into their private lives. This lack of accountability has emboldened the NSS to expand its surveillance operations, deepening its control over the population.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The NSS has transformed itself from its original mandate of intelligence gathering into one of the most repressive and unchecked forces within the country.

As highlighted in this report, its evolution has been driven by the sweeping powers granted under the 2014 NSS Act and its amendments, allowing the agency to operate with impunity. These powers have led to widespread human rights abuses. The NSS, no longer confined to internal security, has extended its reach beyond borders, employing abductions and assassinations to silence critics and political dissidents abroad.

The NSS's actions have systematically targeted political opposition, civil society organisations, and the media, eroding the very foundations of South Sudan's democracy. Its unchecked surveillance and enforcement tactics have silenced dissent, stifled free speech, and created a pervasive climate of fear. As a result, civil liberties in South Sudan have been severely compromised, with citizens, activists, and journalists unable to express themselves or participate in the democratic process without the threat of violent retribution. This suppression of civil society not only undermines democratic principles but also weakens institutions vital for protecting human rights.

Despite limited attempts at reform, such as the amendment of the NSS Act, meaningful oversight and accountability for the NSS remain elusive. The agency continues to operate outside the bounds of law, serving as a tool for political repression rather than national security. The failure to impose accountability mechanisms has entrenched a culture of impunity within the NSS, further enabling its role in state-sponsored repression and limiting opportunities for South Sudan to achieve justice and equitable governance. The path forward for South Sudan requires urgent and comprehensive reforms. The international community must play a pivotal role in supporting these efforts by applying diplomatic pressure, tying aid to tangible improvements in human rights, and empowering local civil society organisations to hold the NSS accountable. Restoring the rule of law and ensuring that the NSS operates within legal boundaries is critical to reversing the damage done to South Sudan's democratic processes and civil society space. Without these reforms, the NSS will continue undermining hope for sustainable peace and stability.

Ultimately, the journey toward peace and democracy in South Sudan will be long and fraught with challenges. However, there is no alternative but to confront the power of the NSS and reestablish the rule of law. Only through collective action—by domestic

reformers and the international community—can South Sudan move toward a future where civil liberties are protected, institutions are strengthened, and citizens can freely engage in the democratic process without fear of retribution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sanction present and past leaders of the NSS:** the international community needs to take decisive action against the leadership of South Sudan and the NSS to address the ongoing impunity. Past and present leaders of the NSS should be held accountable for their actions, in line with recommendations from the United Nations and other international organisations, including targeted sanctions. This accountability should include the operationalisation of the Hybrid Court as provided for in the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan. Establishing the Hybrid Court would provide a crucial judicial mechanism to prosecute those responsible for human rights abuses and ensure justice in South Sudan.
- Reform legal framework:** Pressure the Government of South Sudan to rescind the 2024 amendment of the NSS Act and introduce a new bill to limit its powers, ensuring compliance with human rights standards, financial transparency and strengthening judicial oversight mechanisms.
- Enhance oversight and human rights monitoring:** Expand the powers to include inquiry powers and extend the composition and mandate of the UN Human Rights Commission for South Sudan to document abuses and support judicial reform efforts.
- Strengthen accountability:** Establish an independent civilian oversight body to monitor NSS activities, investigate abuses, and enforce accountability—by conditioning international aid on tangible security sector reforms, including demilitarising state governance.
- Support civil society:** International actors should prioritise funding and technical support for South Sudanese CSOs that advocate for human rights, governance, and accountability. These organisations are crucial in documenting abuses and advocating for reforms. International protection should also be extended to human rights defenders at risk of persecution, ensuring their work can continue free from fear of NSS harassment.
- Promote media freedom:** Media freedom is under significant threat in South Sudan due to NSS repression. International partners must support initiatives that protect journalists, provide legal safeguards for media outlets, and establish independent press councils. Training programmes for journalists and legal reforms protecting media freedom are critical to ensuring citizens have access to independent information.
- Apply diplomatic pressure:** International partners, including the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN), must exert diplomatic pressure on the South Sudanese government to implement meaningful reforms within the NSS. This can be achieved through high-level dialogue, public statements, and resolutions in international forums. Legislative reforms should be encouraged to curtail the NSS's authority, particularly regarding arbitrary detentions, surveillance, and the use of excessive force against civilians.

8. **Condition aid on reforms:** Financial assistance from international donors should be contingent upon concrete progress in security sector reforms, particularly within the NSS. Aid should be tied to demonstrable improvements in human rights practices and establishing accountability mechanisms. Careful management is essential to ensure that conditionality does not harm civilians, focusing instead on strengthening governance institutions and human rights frameworks.
9. **Support comprehensive security sector reform (SSR):** International partners should prioritise security sector reform, including professionalising the NSS, enhancing respect for human rights, and promoting civilian oversight. This should involve training on ethical intelligence gathering, lawful detention procedures, and dismantling entrenched patronage networks within the NSS. SSR efforts must be accompanied by restructuring the power dynamics that allow the NSS to function as a repressive tool of political control.
10. **Promote accountability through international mechanisms:** Continued support for international accountability mechanisms such as the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) is essential. Regional bodies like the East African Community (EAC) and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) should also take a more active role in holding South Sudan accountable for abuses by the NSS, particularly its extraterritorial operations targeting dissidents.
11. **Encourage merit-based appointments and civilian oversight:** International partners must insist on merit-based appointment processes within the NSS, promoting professionalism over political or ethnic loyalty. Strengthening civilian oversight mechanisms, such as independent bodies with investigative powers, will help monitor NSS activities, review appointments, and audit operations. International support should include technical and financial assistance to develop these oversight bodies and foster transparency.
12. **Enhance human rights monitoring:** International organisations, such as the UN and NGOs, should increase their presence in South Sudan, expanding field offices and deploying more human rights observers. Enhanced documentation of NSS abuses will keep international attention focused on these violations and provide evidence for future accountability efforts.
13. **Promote legal and judicial reforms:** Strengthening South Sudan's judicial institutions is essential to curbing NSS impunity. International partners should provide technical assistance for judges, lawyers, and human rights defenders while promoting access to justice through legal aid programmes. Independent legal institutions must be developed to investigate and prosecute NSS abuses, restoring confidence in the rule of law.

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