

South Sudan:

Statement on the democratic impasse and electoral readiness

Context

In early 2024, South Sudan's National Elections Commission (NEC) confirmed December 2024 as the long-awaited date for general elections, raising hopes for a democratic transition after years of delay. However, on 13 September 2024, just months ahead of the proposed vote, President Salva Kiir announced a two-year extension of the transitional period, pushing the elections to 22 December 2026. This marked the fifth delay since independence in 2011, further eroding public trust and intensifying demands for transparency, accountability, and reform.

In response, the East and Horn of Africa Election Observers Network (E-HORN) convened the **South Sudan Country Forum** on 15 September 2024 in Juba under the AHEAD Africa project. The Forum brought together 32 representatives from 11 civil society organisations (CSOs), including peace and security advocates, youth leaders, women's groups, and electoral experts. The objective was clear: assess the impact of the latest electoral delay, develop a CSO-led roadmap for democratic recovery, and ignite a renewed commitment to citizen-centered accountability. "We cannot treat 2026 like we did 2024. This forum is our commitment to preparation, inclusion, and citizen-driven accountability," said Galdino Ochama, Executive Director of the South Sudanese Network for Democracy and Elections (SSuNDE).

The NEC's decision to postpone elections came at no surprise, as this outcome had been predicted and called for during E-HORN's 15 August 2024 [webinar](#) "Navigating the Crossroads: Analysis of South Sudan Election Preparedness," where regional and national experts raised serious concerns over the feasibility of holding credible elections under the then prevailing conditions, and AHEAD Africa's [statement](#) highlighting key concerns on the country's lack of electoral readiness.

Following the latest conversations on the root causes, political incentives, and the democratic and developmental costs of postponed elections during a joint [webinar](#) hosted by E-HORN and the African Election Observers Network (AfEONet) on May 2025, and having kicked off subgrants with two South Sudanese E-HORN members and South Sudan Country Forum conveners –SSuNDE and the Standard Action Liaison Force (SALF)—, this statement provides a comprehensive assessment of South Sudan's electoral preparedness and calls for urgent reforms to ensure 2026 elections are conducted with integrity.

A crisis of legitimacy and leadership

The repeated postponement of general elections, now deferred to December 2026, reveals more than a logistical delay—it exposes a deep-rooted crisis of leadership, legitimacy, and public trust. It is not merely about timelines missed or processes stalled; it is about the future of a people still yearning for peace, dignity, and development. The people of South Sudan have been waiting for elections since 2015. These elections have been postponed five times. This keeps the country in a permanent election mode. It is not good for development. It is not good for the people.

Popular will vs. political obstruction

South Sudanese citizens have shown time and again that they are not apathetic. From village assemblies to urban debates on social media platforms, there is a persistent demand for change—a government that serves, not dominates; leadership that is accountable, not entrenched. The South Sudanese people are very much ready for elections. They are on the streets talking about elections because they are ready to bring their representatives to parliament who can champion their issues. Yet this public will is repeatedly stifled by political elites whose primary concern remains self-preservation. The transitional government, originally tasked with delivering a constitution, unifying the army, conducting a census, and preparing credible elections, has not completed any of these mandates. Do political leaders deliberately create crises so people don't go for elections, aiming to remain in power and avoid accountability?

These ongoing crises erode public trust in security forces, fuel violence, and weaken state institutions, undermining their ability to maintain security, deliver basic services, implement reforms, and hold free and fair elections—unless there is a fundamental change in leadership behavior.

Institutional weakness and elite inertia

The interim government's prolonged failure to deliver on its commitments is a crisis of political will—not capacity. The NEC, which should inspire trust and credibility, remains under-resourced, politically influenced, and lacking inclusion. Legal ambiguities and presidential authority to appoint parliamentarians further compromise the principle of democratic representation. Elections need a framework—they need security as a pillar of governance and neutral institutions to midwife democracy.

The absence of a strong and independent judiciary and the prevalence of political repression lead to increased human rights violations. Currently, many South Sudanese lack access to justice, making it difficult to seek redress for grievances or rights violations. Without urgent judicial reform—essential to address electoral grievances—these challenges will only worsen. The continued delay of elections risks fueling conflict and deepening exclusion. It further erodes trust in peace efforts, leaving them fragile and likely to collapse—this is the crossroads South Sudan faces today.

Civil society as a beacon of hope

Despite this challenging environment, civil society remains a powerful force for change. Through the AHEAD Africa project, organisations such as SSuNDE and SALF are implementing targeted interventions to increase voter awareness, advocate legal reform, and hold institutions accountable. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of civic engagement to shift the political culture. We must recognise civil society as the last line of defense. If the people were putting up enough demand, South Sudan could have held elections already. Democracy is not a gift from the elite; it is built by the demand of citizens. If the people of South Sudan do not demand it, no one will deliver it to them.

Call to action

Civil society cannot shoulder this burden alone. The transitional government must act with urgency and integrity. Regional and international partners must go beyond rhetoric and enforce meaningful accountability. Citizens must remain engaged, informed, and vocal.

Democracy is not postponed—it is prepared. This year must be one of action: reform the laws, fund the institutions, engage the people, and commit to meaningful elections. The cost of further delay is not just political stagnation—it is the erosion of hope, violation of human and people rights.

Recommendations

- 1. Convene a national conference:** Bring together political leaders, civil society, and international observers to agree on a minimal reform agenda.
- 2. Minimum legal reforms:** Amend the current constitution to enable elections without rushing the full constitutional process.
- 3. Strengthen the Electoral Commission independence:** Reform its composition, ensure gender balance, and secure adequate funding.
- 4. Guarantee security and civic space:** Complete security arrangements and disband armed groups to create a conducive environment for elections.
- 5. Transparent accountability framework:** Assign responsibilities, track progress, and hold leaders accountable through civil society and regional oversight.

Conclusion

South Sudan stands at a critical juncture. The population's readiness for democracy contrasts starkly with elite resistance and systemic dysfunction. Without meaningful legal, institutional, and political reforms, the 2026 elections risk becoming another missed opportunity. E-HORN urges sustained engagement, people-centered reforms, and regional solidarity to ensure South Sudan's democratic transition is not indefinitely postponed.

Signatories

AHEAD Africa consortium, SSuNDE and SALF.