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COMMUNIQUE OF THE 2026 SOUTH SUDAN COUNTRY FORUM

Theme: “Ready or Not: Assessing South Sudan’s Preparedness for the 22 December 2026 Elections”

23–24 September 2026 | Glory Regency Hotel, Juba, South Sudan

Preamble

We, representatives of national institutions, electoral and oversight bodies, civil society organizations, civic networks, women and youth representatives, organizations of persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups, media organizations, human rights defenders, political and community stakeholders, and regional and international partners, convened in Juba at the Glory Regency Hotel from 23–24 September 2026 for the 2026 South Sudan Country Forum¹.

The Forum was jointly organized by the South Sudanese Network for Democracy and Elections (SSUNDE), which provided local coordination and mobilization of participants, and the East and Horn of Africa Election Observation Network (E-HORN), the regional implementing partner under the AHEAD¹ Africa Project. E-HORN provided regional convening, technical and logistical support, drawing on its experience in electoral observation and democratic governance. The AHEAD Africa Project, funded by the European Union, supported the overall implementation of the Forum. Digitalise Youth, through the Digital Democracy Initiative (DDI), also contributed to discussions and engagement on youth participation, digital civic space, and digital democracy.

The Forum was convened under the theme: “Ready or Not: Assessing South Sudan’s Preparedness for the 22 December 2026 Elections.”

The Forum provided a platform to assess South Sudan’s preparedness for the scheduled 22 December 2026 elections, with particular attention to the legal and constitutional framework, institutional gaps and operational readiness, civic and political space, security environment, and inclusive participation.

Following deliberations and consideration of the issues presented, participants adopted the conclusions and recommendations contained in this Communiqué. These are directed to relevant institutions and stakeholders within their respective constitutional, statutory and institutional mandates.

The Forum emphasized that electoral credibility depends not only on election-day polling, but on the broader electoral environment, including a lawful framework, prepared and independent institutions, meaningful civic and political space, inclusive participation, reliable information, adequate security, and accessible mechanisms for electoral complaints and dispute resolution.

1. Overall Assessment

The Forum identified interconnected concerns relating to:

the legal and constitutional framework; institutional independence and preparedness; compressed electoral timelines; voter registration and electoral logistics; civic and political space; security and conflict-

¹ Action for a Holistic Electoral Approach for Democracy,

related risks; inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities and other underserved groups; and the capacity of institutions responsible for administering and adjudicating the electoral process. Participants called for coordinated, measurable and timely action by all relevant institutions and stakeholders, with each acting within its lawful mandate.

1.1. Legal and Constitutional Framework

Participants noted that the December 2026 elections are being conducted within the framework of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), 2018 and the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, 2011, as amended.

The Forum noted that the 2026 legal and constitutional framework has delinked the conduct of elections from completion of a new national population and housing census and the Permanent Constitution-making process. However, outstanding questions remain concerning representation, constituency delimitation, the electoral system and related transitional arrangements. Participants called for these issues to be addressed through lawful, inclusive and transparent processes consistent with the R-ARCSS, the Transitional Constitution and applicable law.

The Forum expressed concern about the continued detention of political leaders who are parties to the R-ARCSS and called for their release to enable meaningful participation in political dialogue and the political process, subject to applicable law. Participants also noted that unilateral decisions inconsistent with agreed collegial arrangements for implementation of the R-ARCSS may heighten political tensions and risks of conflict or reprisals.

The Forum further called for authoritative clarification, where necessary, concerning the interaction between the R-ARCSS, the Transitional Constitution and electoral legislation, noting the precedence of the R-ARCSS under Article 8.3 where conflicts arise. Participants also raised concerns regarding dissolution and caretaker arrangements and emphasized that any measure affecting the constitutional structure, tenure, composition or exercise of authority by constitutional institutions must have a clear legal basis and remain consistent with the Constitution (as amended) and the R-ARCSS.

In particular, the Forum called for clarification of:

the legal basis for dissolution of transitional legislative and state-government institutions; the constitutional and statutory basis, status and mandate of any national caretaker arrangement; the scope and limits of executive authority during the electoral period; the constitutional status and powers of the President and Vice Presidents pending assumption of office by elected authorities; and the duration and legal limits of transitional and caretaker arrangements.

1.2. Electoral Institutions and Operational Preparedness

National Elections Commission (NEC)

The Forum expressed concern regarding the recent change in leadership of the NEC and emphasized the importance of maintaining public confidence in the Commission's independence, integrity and impartiality. Participants recalled that the NEC is an independent institution mandated to organize and conduct elections in accordance with the Constitution and law. The Forum called for transparency concerning the legal basis and institutional implications of the leadership change and urged all authorities to safeguard the NEC's independence and operational capacity.

Operational Timelines and Voter Registration

The Forum noted the highly compressed electoral timeframe and that voter registration had not commenced at the time of the Forum. The NEC must undertake, within the remaining period,

interconnected activities including voter registration and verification, preparation of the voter register, candidate nomination and verification, procurement and deployment of materials, establishment of polling centres, voter education, recruitment and training of personnel, and operationalization of complaints and dispute-resolution mechanisms.

Participants therefore called for:

publication and regular updating of a realistic electoral operational timetable; adequate financial, logistical, technical and human resources; timely voter registration and verification; sufficient preparation for polling, counting and results management; accessible electoral complaints and dispute-resolution mechanisms; and regular public reporting on progress, gaps and corrective measures.

The Forum considered findings from the Standard Action Liaison Force (SALF) Research Report, June 2026, which assessed institutional preparedness at approximately 35% for the NEC, 20% for the security sector and 15% for the judiciary and electoral dispute-resolution mechanisms, against a 50% minimum preparedness benchmark. Participants emphasized that these figures are findings of SALF's assessment and are not official performance ratings of the respective institutions.

The Forum called for an urgent, coordinated and measurable institutional-readiness programme addressing financial, logistical, technical, human-resource and operational gaps.

1.3. Civic and Political Space

The Forum noted concerns regarding freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and movement, as well as the exercise of security and surveillance powers. Participants referred to Sections 54 and 55 of the National Security Service Act, as amended in 2024, and continuing concerns regarding their potential impact on civic and political space and fundamental rights.

The Forum called for review, repeal or appropriate amendment of measures that unduly restrict constitutionally protected freedoms and for safeguards ensuring that security and surveillance powers are exercised strictly within the Constitution and applicable law.

Participants further called for:

strengthened civic and voter education; reliable and accessible electoral information; measures addressing misinformation and disinformation; protection of personal and electoral data; and an enabling environment for peaceful civic and political participation.

1.4. Security and Electoral Environment

The Forum noted that the electoral process is unfolding amid ongoing conflict, localized violence and insecurity in several parts of the country, including areas of Jonglei, Upper Nile, Unity, Greater Bahr el Ghazal and the Equatorias, together with fragmentation among armed actors and outstanding transitional security arrangements. Participants expressed concern that insecurity may affect voter registration, voter education, campaigning, access to polling centres, movement of electoral materials and personnel, polling and counting, results management and dispute resolution.

The Forum called upon the Government and relevant security institutions to:

strengthen coordinated electoral-security arrangements; clarify institutional responsibilities and command structures; establish measures to prevent and respond to electoral-related violence; strengthen early-warning, conflict-prevention, civilian-protection and incident-response mechanisms; and ensure that security measures facilitate, rather than unduly restrict, lawful civic and political participation.

Security arrangements should remain neutral, coordinated, rights-respecting and consistent with the R-ARCSS, Constitution and applicable law.

1.5. Inclusive Participation

The Forum reaffirmed the importance of meaningful and equal participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced persons, returnees and other marginalized or underserved communities throughout the electoral cycle.

Women

Participants called for measures to address legal, institutional, social, economic, security and practical barriers to women's participation as voters, candidates, political actors and decision-makers. Particular attention should be given to preventing and responding to political violence, intimidation, harassment and technology-facilitated abuse targeting women.

Youth

The Forum reaffirmed young people as rights-holders and important participants in democratic and electoral processes. It called for removal of barriers to registration and participation and for opportunities for young people to participate as voters, candidates, election officials, observers, civic actors and community leaders.

Persons with Disabilities and Other Underserved Groups

The NEC, Government institutions, political parties, civil society and other stakeholders were called upon to ensure that voter registration, education, polling and electoral information are physically, procedurally and informationally accessible. Reasonable accommodation and appropriate accessibility measures should be provided, and representatives of affected groups should be meaningfully included in electoral consultations and planning.

1.6. Information, Data Protection and Media

The Forum recognized that misinformation and disinformation, combined with weak data-protection safeguards, may undermine public confidence and disproportionately affect groups facing barriers to reliable information.

Participants called for:

accurate, timely and accessible electoral information; strengthened protection of personal and electoral data; responsible and ethical media reporting; strengthened fact-checking and public-interest journalism; equitable access to reliable electoral information; journalist safety and professional independence; and reporting practices that avoid unnecessarily inflaming political or communal tensions while maintaining legitimate scrutiny of public institutions.

2. Priority Institutional Commitments

2.1. National Elections Commission

The Forum called upon the NEC to:

administer and supervise elections in accordance with the Constitution, the National Elections Act and applicable regulations; publish and regularly update a comprehensive electoral operational timetable;

provide timely, accurate and accessible public information; strengthen consultation with political parties, civil society, women, youth, persons with disabilities, media and community stakeholders; establish accessible electoral complaints and dispute-resolution mechanisms; ensure inclusive and non-discriminatory electoral procedures; strengthen electoral-data security, data protection, cybersecurity, transparency and auditability; and maintain and publicly demonstrate institutional independence and impartiality.

2.2. Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs

The Forum called upon the Ministry to:

ensure public access to the Constitution, electoral legislation, regulations and procedures; disseminate authoritative versions of relevant legal instruments; support public legal education on electoral rights and obligations; clarify constitutional and statutory ambiguities affecting the electoral process; and ensure measures affecting civic and political freedoms are consistent with the Constitution, applicable law and relevant obligations.

2.3. Civil Society, faith-based institutions and Human Rights Actors

Civil society organizations, faith-based institutions and human rights defenders were encouraged to:

expand impartial, rights-based civic and voter education; monitor and document human-rights and civic-space conditions; promote participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced persons and marginalized communities; support inclusive political dialogue; complement public information while maintaining institutional independence; and promote evidence-based public discourse and responsible responses to misinformation and disinformation.

2.4. Regional and International Support

The Forum called upon appropriate regional and international partners to provide technical cooperation, capacity-building, regional solidarity and support for electoral observation, inclusive participation, electoral integrity, civic space, election security and dispute resolution, consistent with national law and recognized standards.

The Forum further called upon the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), within its R-ARCSS mandate, to continue monitoring and reporting on implementation of the Agreement and roadmap, support sustained and inclusive political dialogue, identify outstanding transitional commitments relevant to elections, and encourage timely resolution of political, security and institutional issues affecting the transition.

2.5. Priority Cross-Cutting Recommendations

The Forum calls for the following priority actions:

Establish a coordinated electoral-readiness mechanism involving relevant institutions and stakeholders, with clear responsibilities, measurable benchmarks and regular public reporting. Prioritize institutional preparedness of the NEC, security institutions, judiciary and electoral dispute-resolution mechanisms, addressing identified financial, logistical, technical and human-resource gaps. Protect civic and political space, including freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and movement, consistent with the Constitution and applicable law.

Strengthen electoral security while ensuring that security measures facilitate lawful political participation and respect human rights. Strengthen access to accurate electoral information and address misinformation and disinformation without undermining freedom of expression. Protect personal and electoral data

through appropriate privacy, security and accountability safeguards. Ensure meaningful inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities, displaced persons, returnees and other underserved communities throughout the electoral cycle.

Maintain accessible and effective complaint and dispute-resolution mechanisms so that electoral disagreements are addressed through lawful and peaceful institutional processes. Promote regular public reporting on electoral preparedness, outstanding risks, corrective actions and areas requiring additional support. Sustain national and regional dialogue to address outstanding political, legal, institutional and security concerns through peaceful, inclusive and lawful means.

2.6. Conclusion

The Forum concluded that electoral credibility is a product of the entire electoral environment, not merely the conduct of polling on election day. It depends on a lawful and coherent framework, independent and adequately prepared electoral institutions, meaningful civic and political space, inclusive participation, reliable public information, effective and neutral security arrangements, accessible complaint and dispute-resolution mechanisms, and respect for constitutional and fundamental rights.

The Forum therefore called upon all relevant institutions and stakeholders to discharge their respective responsibilities within their constitutional and statutory mandates; address identified gaps with urgency and transparency and maintain sustained cooperation throughout the electoral cycle. Participants affirmed that the commitments and recommendations contained in this Communiqué are intended to contribute to a peaceful, inclusive, transparent, lawful and credible electoral process, while respecting the independence of state institutions, the rights of citizens and the legitimate diversity of political views and interests in South Sudan.

3. Status of the Communiqué

This Communiqué records the conclusions, commitments and recommendations adopted by participants at the 2026 South Sudan Country Forum held in Juba on 23–24 September 2026. It is intended as a stakeholder communiqué and advocacy framework.

It does not purport to amend, supersede or independently interpret the Constitution, the R-ARCSS, legislation or the mandate of any competent institution. Its recommendations are to be understood and implemented, where applicable, within the constitutional, statutory and institutional mandates of the relevant authorities and stakeholders.

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