

Self-Determination in South Sudan: Contested Political Ideologies and Historical Claims

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Abstract

This paper examines the contested historical development of self-determination in South Sudan, with particular emphasis on Riek Machar's pivotal role in transforming the movement's aspirations into an explicit and negotiable political right. By analyzing colonial-era debates, internal divisions, peace agreements, and the legal framework preceding independence, the study contends that while earlier southern leaders pursued autonomy and political recognition, Riek Machar's advocacy established external self-determination as a concrete objective. The analysis situates this development within the ideological divide that shaped southern Sudanese liberation politics after 1991, contrasting Riek Machar's stance with John Garang's New Sudan vision. Drawing on key agreements, including the 1997 Khartoum Peace Agreement, and relevant historical literature, the study demonstrates how competing ideologies influenced the SPLA split and shaped Southern Sudan's political trajectory. It further addresses ongoing debates among South Sudanese political actors regarding attribution for the principle that culminated in the 2011 referendum and independence. The paper concludes that while the broader southern resistance provided essential foundations, Riek Machar was instrumental in advancing self-determination as a tangible political right.

Keywords

Self-Determination, South Sudan, New Sudan, Khartoum Peace Agreement, Political Ideology, Liberation Struggle, Independence, Referendum, Riek Machar, John Garang

1. Introduction

The struggle for self-determination in South Sudan has been a central theme in

the country's political history since 1991 (Melese, 2025). While earlier Southern Sudanese leaders such as Both Dieu, Clement Mboro, James Tambura, and Edward Adhok, among others, articulated aspirations for autonomy, it was Riek Machar who formally embedded the principle into national political discourse. For instance, the Khartoum Peace Agreement (KPA) of 1997, signed under the regime of Omar al-Bashir, explicitly recognized that "the people of South Sudan shall exercise the right of self-determination through a referendum" (Khartoum Peace Agreement (KPA), 1997, art. 4).

On the contrary view, the SPLM/A under John Garang articulated a national liberation agenda and framed Sudan's crisis as a state-wide problem (Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), 2008a; 2008b). Popularized as the "New Sudan" vision, this ideology sought to redefine unity through constitutional restructuring, devolution of power, and secular governance (Rogier, 2005, p. 28). These competing ideological orientations contributed to the SPLM/A split in August 1991, when the movement fractured into SPLM/A United Nasir led by Riek Machar and the SPLM/A Torit led by John Garang.

Although many historical accounts credit Riek Machar with championing the self-determination, some veterans and emerging politicians in South Sudan have reopened the debate over who should be credited with advancing the principle that ultimately culminated in independence. This article will answer the question: Who is the architect of South Sudan's self-determination? The term "architect" of self-determination refers to the political leader who explicitly institutionalized and formalized this principle as a right within negotiated agreements. This is different from simply proposing the concept or supervising its implementation. This analysis focuses on individuals who transformed self-determination into a binding political project. Although the emphasis is on formalization, it acknowledges that conceptual development and implementation involved different actors.

2. Historical Milestone on Self-Determination

Self-determination is recognized under international law as a legal right enabling peoples to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development (United Nations, 1981). To fully comprehend self-determination construct, one must understand its two forms: The internal and external self-determination. Internal self-determination refers to the exercise of political and social rights within an existing state. External self-determination, by contrast, entails full independence or secession from a larger politico-legal entity (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2021). External self-determination was the path ultimately taken by South Sudan, culminating in the 2011 referendum. As a result of the 2011 referendum, South Sudan's population overwhelmingly voted for independence, the primary locus of this article.

To understand the roots of self-determination in South Sudan, one must trace the historical narrative across several decades. The earliest discussions can be found in the 1947 Juba Conference, where southern leaders such as Both Dieu,

Chief Cier Rehan, Giir Kiro and chief Ukuma Bazia first articulated concerns about autonomy within a united Sudan, foregrounding questions of political representation, administrative self-governance, and the protection of southern interests within the postcolonial state (Okeny, 1991). Subsequent academic and policy literature treats the conference minutes as an early baseline text for understanding and attempting to resolve the structural “North-South problem” in Sudan (Ylönen, 2005). The trajectory of South Sudan’s self-determination is anchored in a sequence of political and legal instruments negotiated over decades. Through that sequence of events, South Sudan autonomy gradually evolved into the architecture of statehood (de Chand, 1995).

The First Sudanese Civil War began in 1955, starting a period of armed conflict in postcolonial Sudan. Structural tensions arose because the Sudanese state failed to create an inclusive political system that addressed regional, religious, cultural, and historical diversity. These divisions stemmed from a clear split between the predominantly Arabized and Muslim north and the largely African, indigenous south (Yoh, 2018). Southern Sudanese populations raised concerns about political domination, exclusion from administration, and cultural marginalisation. Before Sudan’s independence, a mutiny in the southern town of Torit escalated into armed conflict, triggering the First Sudanese Civil War in 1955. In the following years, the conflict became a sustained insurgency led by the “Anyanya” movement, which sought political self-determination (Yoh, 2018).

A second pivotal milestone emerged in 1972 with the Addis Ababa Agreement on the Problem of South Sudan (Melese, 2025). The agreement ended the First Sudanese Civil War by establishing regional autonomy for Southern Sudan within a united Sudan. Furthermore, the agreement institutionalized a regional government arrangement, later operationalized through the Law for Regional Self-Government in the Southern Provinces (Government of the Democratic Republic of the Sudan & Southern Sudan Liberation Movement, 1972). In the post-agreement governance structure, Abel Alier, a principal negotiator and a unionist of the settlement assumed leadership of the autonomous administration and served in government during the early years of the autonomy period (Sudan Government & Southern Sudan Liberation Movement, 1972).

Self-determination was progressively institutionalized through a series of negotiated peace instruments that unfolded alongside the evolution of Sudan’s civil wars and settlement attempts. The ideological backdrop to this legal trajectory was shaped in May 1983 with the emergence of the SPLM/A. Under John Garang’s leadership, the movement framed Sudan’s crisis as a national problem rooted in structural exclusion rather than as a set of Southern grievances alone, a position later popularized as the “New Sudan” agenda aimed at transforming governance across the entire country rather than pursuing separation (de Vries & Schomerus, 2017).

Over time, aspirations resurfaced in various political dialogues, including the 1992 meeting in Washington between Riek Machar and John Garang. This meet-

ing highlighted the growing demand for recognition of southern identity and rights, and the need to translate longstanding grievances into a coherent political claim (Peace Agreements Database (PA-X), 1993).

Within this shifting political landscape, a decisive regional mediation milestone followed in 1994 through the IGAD Declaration of Principles (DoP). The DoP linked the establishment of a secular constitutional order to durable peace. In the event that secular constitutional order could not be achieved, the IGAD incorporated external self-determination as a remedial option. The inclusion of external self-determination as a remedial alternative led to a turning point in the negotiation architecture by formally elevating external self-determination from political aspiration to a recognized pathway to peace. To cement external Self-determination in the Sudan history book, Riek Machar argued in “South Sudan: A History of Political Domination - A Case of Self-determination” that continued domination would have “negative consequences on the region and may compromise the stability of the region”. Riek Machar stressed that lasting peace required South-erners to exercise their “inalienable and democratic rights to [external] self-determination” through an internationally supervised referendum (Machar Teny-Dhurgon, 1995).

Building on these earlier historical milestones, the KPA further acknowledged the principle of external self-determination. This laid the groundwork for more formal negotiations by shifting the concept from a moral-political demand into a negotiable provision within peace-making frameworks. The agreement affirmed that “The people of South Sudan shall exercise the right of [external] self-determination through a referendum,” (Khartoum Peace Agreement (KPA), 1997) establishing a critical precedent by formally recognizing external self-determination as a legally articulated entitlement in a negotiated settlement.

The KPA culminated in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, which legally enshrined the right of the South Sudanese people to determine their future through a referendum. This made external self-determination a juridical mechanism rather than just a rhetorical aspiration. The right to external self-determination was further consolidated through CPA negotiations, anchored in the Machakos Protocol signed in Kenya in 2002. The CPA affirmed that “the people of South Sudan have the right to [external] self-determination, inter alia, through a referendum to determine their future status” (Government of the Republic of the Sudan & Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Sudan People’s Liberation Army, 2005). The CPA established a six-year interim period during which the Government of Sudan (GOS) was expected to make unity attractive to the people of Sudan and Southern Sudan; otherwise, secession would become inevitable.

To convert the CPA’s political commitment into an enforceable legal mechanism, the National Legislature (2009) codified the institutional and procedural architecture governing voter eligibility, political rights, balloting procedures, and supervisory authority. In doing so, it transformed the referendum from a negotiated political concession into a juridically constituted instrument for the exercise

of self-determination.

The referendum was held in January 2011 (De’Nyok, 2025). It included provisions for out-of-country voting and oversight by international monitors. These measures enhanced both the procedural legitimacy the degree to which the process adhered to established legal procedures and the process’s credibility within the international community. The referendum’s primary objective was to enable the people of Southern Sudan to exercise their right to self-determination, a principle that holds that people have the right to freely choose their sovereignty and international political status. It offered a choice between remaining part of a united Sudan or establishing an independent sovereign state. The Southern Sudan Referendum Commission (SSRC) announced the official results in February 2011. These results established the constitutional basis meaning the legal foundation in a country’s highest law for sovereign statehood. They enabled the adoption of the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan as the foundational legal framework for the new state. South Sudan’s international legal status its recognition as a state under international law was conclusively affirmed in July 2011 by its admission to the United Nations under Resolution A/RES/65/308 (United Nations General Assembly, 2011).

In January 2011, the people of South Sudan overwhelmingly endorsed independence through the referendum, thereby realising a long-contested claim to external self-determination through a decisive and internationally recognised expression of popular sovereignty. This outcome marked the culmination of decades of armed struggle, political negotiation, and constitutional contestation, paving the way for the formal declaration of independence on 9 July 2011 (De’Nyok, 2025). The result represented not merely the end of one phase of conflict and negotiation, but the constitutional and political affirmation of a collective claim to nationhood. Current discussions on social media and in public forums show that many South Sudanese continue to view this moment as the clearest expression of the people’s will to establish an independent state.

Yet debates endure over how political authorship should be assigned to a historical process shaped by collective sacrifice, protracted diplomacy, and gradual institutional consolidation. This tension is analytically important because it reveals that South Sudan’s independence resists reduction to the legacy of any single actor. Rather, it emerged through the historical convergence of popular aspiration, liberation politics, negotiated settlement, and legal-constitutional transformation.

3. The Juba Conference of 1947

The proposal presented at the 1947 Juba Conference by Sir Botho Dieke and thirteen delegates from the Southern Sudan emphasized the need for self-rule (Marwood, 1947). The main purpose of the 1947 Juba Conference was to inform the chiefs of South Sudan of an irreversible decision to handover South Sudan to the North. The decision led to the establishment of the Sudan Legislative Assembly in 1948

(Machar Teny-Dhurgon, 1995). Although these individuals were handpicked merely as token representatives, their voices carried weight, and the principle of internal self-determination was recorded in the minutes of the conference. This clause later became a recurring feature in subsequent peace agreements signed with successive Khartoum regimes.

To place this in context, since 1898, the South had been governed through indirect rule, a cornerstone of British colonial policy. Over time, this system evolved into more restrictive measures, such as the Closed District Act of 1920, which required Southerners to obtain passports and permits to travel to the North. Even Arab traders operating in the South were subjected to these regulations (Machar Teny-Dhurgon, 1995).

As a result of these policies, the South was allowed to pursue its own educational, political, and socio-economic development, albeit within a controlled framework. Consequently, by the time of the 1947 Juba Conference, the delegates had already experienced a form of practical autonomy. This lived reality provided the foundation for their demand for internal self-determination, which they viewed not as an abstract idea but as a continuation of their existing self-rule (Sudan Government, 1947; Sudan Government, Bahr el Ghazal Province, Office of the Deputy Governor, 1947).

4. Declaration of Principles and Agreements: Frankfurt, Abuja, Nairobi and Washington

4.1. Frankfurt Declaration (January 1992)

One of the key milestones was the Frankfurt Declaration, signed by the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A Nasir faction in January 1992. This agreement marked a pivotal engagement in which Khartoum formally accepted that the people of Southern Sudan should have the right to determine their own constitutional future. As a result, the declaration became part of the historical documents of the Sudan peace process. By institutionalising internal self-determination as a negotiated political principle, this agreement represented a significant shift: prior to this agreement, the government of Sudan had sought to oppose Southern claims framed in terms of internal self-determination. Nasir's 1991 split brought external self-determination to the forefront of all engagements, and the Frankfurt talks subsequently brought these demands into active negotiation. Consequently, the declaration changed the discourse of the Sudan conflict; external self-determination could no longer be dismissed as a marginal slogan but was recognised as a key political vocabulary of peace negotiation (Rogier, 2005).

The Frankfurt Declaration was a precursor, not a settlement. The war persisted, and disputes over religion, state structure, power-sharing, and sovereignty remained unresolved. It did not mandate a referendum, but it did establish an irreversible principle in the peace process. The declaration is remembered as the point at which external self-determination entered negotiations and remained in the documents until realised. Later, it paved the way for agreements where external

self-determination became central to Southern Sudan's discourse (Machar Teny-Dhurgon, 1995).

4.2. Abuja Agreement on Reconciliation of the Divided SPLM/A (19 June 1992)

The Agreement on Reconciliation of the divided Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) was signed in Abuja on 19 June 1992 by the SPLM/A Torit led by John Garang and SPLM/A-Nasir faction led by Riek Machar. The primary objective was to reunite the two groups and address the mistrust resulting from the 1991 split. Negotiations centred on restoring unity between the factions. Diplomatic pressure in Abuja resulted in a joint declaration. A significant outcome was the endorsement of external self-determination for Southern Sudan. During Abuja 1, William Nyuon Bany signed on behalf of the SPLM/A alongside the Nasir faction and Mohammed El-Amin signed on behalf of GOS and both parties supported external self-determination. Consequently, external self-determination emerged as the most prominent political issue in the agreement (Rogier, 2005).

4.3. Nairobi Communique of the National Democratic Alliance - NDA (17 April 1993)

The Nairobi Communique of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), signed on 17 April 1993, represented a significant effort to establish a unified political front against the Sudanese government. The NDA articulated a commitment to separating religion from the state and rejecting the use of religion as a tool for state domination. The communique emphasised the recognition of cultural, religious, and racial diversity as essential elements of constitutional reality. Furthermore, it advanced the vision of a "New Sudan" founded on principles of equality, citizenship, and non-discrimination. However, the communique did not address the issue of external self-determination for Southern Sudan, which remained a major point of contention and was subsequently addressed in the Washington Declaration later that year (Rogier, 2005).

4.4. Washington Declaration (October 1993)

The Washington Declaration of October 1993 was convened by U.S. Congressman Henry Johnston, Chairman of the House of Africa Subcommittee. The meeting brought together representatives of both the SPLM-United Nasir faction and the SPLM Torit faction. Its main purpose was to reduce the political rupture caused by the 1991 split between the two main rival movements and to establish a common negotiating position within the peace process. It was an attempt to initiate intra-Southern reconciliation, as the people of Southern Sudan were deeply divided militarily and politically, undermining their position against the Sudanese government. The declaration allowed both leaders to understand that the split is costly for the liberation of the people of Southern Sudan (Rolandsen, 2005).

One of the main articles (art.1) of the declaration affirmed "the rights of [exter-

nal] self-determination for the people of Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains, and other marginalised areas” (Machar Teny-Dhurgon, 1995). This document was signed by Riek Machar of SPLM-United and John Garang of SPLM. As a result, the Washington Declaration laid the foundation and bridged the misunderstanding that led to the split between SPLM/A leaders, whose visions diverged significantly. John Garang advocated for a secular, united Sudan, while Riek Machar argued that achieving such a goal was unrealistic and instead renewed the call for external self-determination specifically for the people of South Sudan.

4.5. Declaration of Principles - Nairobi (July 1994)

The Declaration of Principles, signed between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A in Nairobi in July 1994, established the foundational framework for the IGADD-mediated peace process in Sudan. Among the primary issues addressed was the prioritisation of Sudan’s unity. The declaration stipulated that, in the absence of consensus on its principles, the affected populations would have the right to determine their future, including the possibility of independence, through a referendum. The Declaration of Principles subsequently became a key document affirming southern Sudan’s right to external self-determination (The 1993 Abuja 2 Sudanese Peace Conference, 1993).

4.6. Subsequent Reaffirmation (1995)

Subsequent conferences, including the Bonn Conference (1995) organized to settle Sudanese political issues and the Asmara Conference (June 1995), reaffirmed this principle. Collectively, these declarations consistently recognised South Sudan’s right to external self-determination.

4.7. Khartoum Peace Agreement (1997)

For nearly two centuries, South Sudan had endured systemic marginalization under Islamic governance. Against this backdrop, Riek Machar came to realize that peaceful and mutual coexistence with North Sudan was unattainable. The North, defined as an Islamic Arab state with policies rooted in the Islamic laws, stood in stark contrast to the South, which embraced traditional African spirituality and Christianity. Given these fundamental differences, coexistence proved impossible. As a result, Riek Machar opted to pursue an independent state, a vision that had already been articulated in the Nasir Declaration of August 28, 1991, under SPLM-United. Building on this earlier stance, the Khartoum Peace Agreement (KPA) was signed on April 21, 1997, and included a critical clause affirming the right of external self-determination. This provision explicitly called for the complete secession of the South into an independent state.

To facilitate this process, the agreement granted a four-year transitional period. Furthermore, the KPA of 1997 helped market the principle of external self-determination both regionally and internationally through the South Sudan Independence Movement/Army (SSIM/A). Importantly, the question of external self-deter-

mination remained consistent with the earlier Nasir Declaration, reinforcing Riek Machar's long-standing position. Throughout all these declarations and agreements, Riek Machar consistently emerged as a key signatory. In every document he endorsed, he ensured that a clause on external self-determination for the people of South Sudan was included, making it a non-negotiable condition in the pursuit of peace and independence.

5. Recent Conversations on External Self-Determination

The question of who should be recognized as the architect of external self-determination has been a recurring theme in recent national conversations among South Sudanese. For instance, Mabior Garang Mabior, Minister of Environment and Forestry in the Government of South Sudan, recently dismissed the debate regarding attribution as the "architect" of external self-determination. Instead, he reframed the discussion, which, according to many observers, may contribute to further obfuscation by asserting that "people may choose separation, or they may choose unity. The principle is about the freedom to choose; secession is just one of the possible results of that choice" (Garang, 2026). By redirecting the focus from individual credit to the broader principle of choice, the Minister shifted away from the central issue under national discussion.

Kok Ruei, a member of Parliament in South Sudan, stated in an interview with Naam Studio (2026) that the principle of external self-determination in South Sudan should be attributed to Riek Machar, whose persistence was instrumental in achieving the country's eventual separation. Kok Ruei noted that the split within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) led to the formation of the SPLM United Nasir faction, which prioritized external self-determination as a central objective. In 1991, Riek Machar played a leading role in the Nasir Declaration, which explicitly called for external self-determination for South Sudanese people at a time when this concept was not widely accepted within the main SPLM faction. Riek Machar and his allies consistently advocated for the inclusion of external self-determination in peace negotiations, particularly during the Abuja peace process and later at the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediated talks. These efforts elevated external self-determination to a central position in the political agenda and facilitated its incorporation into subsequent agreements that shaped South Sudan's future.

The central issue in this debate concerns which South Sudanese political figure merits recognition as "the Architect of external Self-determination," rather than the distinction between "succession" and "external self-determination." This article seeks to refocus the discussion on the primary question: who should be regarded as the principal architect of external self-determination in South Sudan? Identifying the individual who played the pivotal role is not only a matter of historical accuracy but also essential for shaping the nation's identity and political trajectory. As South Sudan continues to define itself in the post-independence era, acknowledging the true architects of external self-determination provides a uni-

ifying narrative, facilitates reflection on past decisions, and informs future leadership and policy development.

6. Conclusion

The vision that culminated in the self-rule of South Sudan has remained a central theme in the political discourse of successive leaders. Yet the distinction between internal self-determination the pursuit of autonomy within a state and external self-determination the right to full secession was often blurred in the public imagination. This conceptual ambiguity made it difficult for South Sudanese to discern which leaders were advocating for unionist reforms and which were pressing for outright independence.

John Garang, as a unionist, envisioned a secular and united Sudan, seeking to transform the state from within. In contrast, Riek Machar consistently advanced the principle of external self-determination, embedding it in declarations and peace agreements as a non-negotiable condition. His insistence on secession was not merely rhetorical but systematically articulated through the Machar et al. (1991), the Khartoum Peace Agreement (KPA) (1997), and later reinforced in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005).

The realization of this vision came in July 2011, when the people of South Sudan overwhelmingly voted for independence, thereby translating decades of political struggle into statehood. From a historical and legal perspective, Riek Machar's role as the architect of external self-determination is evident in both his writings and his political praxis. While John Garang's unionist vision shaped the broader ideological debates, it was Riek Machar's unwavering commitment to secession that ultimately aligned with the aspirations of the majority.

Thus, if credit is to be assigned for the realization of South Sudan's independence, Riek Machar stands as the principal figure the architect of external self-determination whose persistent advocacy transformed a contested principle into a lived political reality.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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