

# **“I am Tired” An Interview Artist and Advocate with Manasseh Mathiang, South Sudan**

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## **Abstract:**

Manasseh Mathaing is an exiled Human Rights Defender and musician. He was born in Khartoum, Sudan. As a child, his family moved to Nairobi, Kenya to escape the violence of the Sudanese Civil War. As a musician, Mathaing has used his art to support the independence of South Sudan and its transition to a stable democracy. Immediately after South Sudan gained independence, Mathaing returned to his homeland and hoped to begin his life as a businessman. The deteriorating political conditions, however, led to his re-igniting his advocacy for democracy. He co-Founded *#Anataban* (I am tired in simple Arabic), a youth led movement made up of thousands of creative South Sudanese around the country. As a result of these actions, he has been politically persecuted and forced to live in exile. He is currently the Executive Director and Founder of Hagiga Ltd, a social enterprise registered in Nairobi aimed at promoting freedom of Expression through art and storytelling. In this interview with Transformations Editor Steve Parks, he speaks to his experience as a refugee, his activism, and his hopes for the future of South Sudan.

## **Keywords:**

Refugee, Democracy, Refugee Camps, Art, Activism, Nation-Building

## INTERVIEW

**Parks:** *Thank you for taking time to talk today. As you know, we are developing a special issue of Transformations focused on issues of refugee and displaced communities. We are particularly interested in how these communities gain power and agency, despite material and political obstacles. Your work is particularly fascinating since you grew up a Sudanese refugee in Kenya, organised refugees to support the creation of South Sudan. Then you continued your advocacy within South Sudan, pushing for the nation to realize the dream of its people. I would like to begin our conversation by asking you about your own refugee experience and how you began your advocacy for the people of South Sudan.*

**Mathiang:** I was born in Khartoum, Sudan. At the age of eight, to escape the violence occurring in my country, we travelled to Nairobi, Kenya, where I have spent most of my life. When we first came to Kenya, I had a lot of culture shock. For example, the language was different. Students were studying in English and in Swahili. Sudan was basically an Arabic speaking nation, though, so I had to learn a new language. I learned to fit in quickly. But throughout the time that I was studying in Kenya, I always felt that I was foreign. I remember every Monday and Friday that we would recite the Kenyan loyalty pledge and sing the Kenyan national anthem in school. It always reminded me that I was foreign. And I think growing up a refugee, there's always an anxious space in your heart where you feel lost. You know that you have a homeland where you could be. You could go there, but you also know you can't go there. During this period, I would see refugees would try to be "at home" while not really *being* home. Whether they were in a Kenyan city or in a refugee camp, there were Sudanese cultural activities that were being done continuously; there were continual attempts to ensure our language was passed on to the next generation. They tried as much as possible to maintain our unity. To remind children where we actually come from. To sustain hope that one day, we will go back home. That work, that hope, is what gives a lot of refugees the ability to not give up. I think that was really important.

That's why I was so excited in the year 2005 when a peace agreement was signed in Kenya called the *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (CPA) between the rebels from south and the government in the north. And that agreement promised a 2011 referendum that allowed for us to have self-determination on the question of independence. I now knew that I might have the opportunity to go back home to experience a place where I felt accepted. And by 2005, I had actually started recording music with two other exiled South Sudanese musicians, Emmanuel Jal and Lam Tungwar, both former child soldiers. We had recorded a song about peace in South Sudan. The song was called *Gua*, which in our local language, means good. In

the song, we were just talking about our picture of what South Sudan would look like if there was peace. We hadn't separated into two countries, yet. We were just thinking about how Sudan would be if we had peace. And we did not know how much that song meant to South Sudanese until we released the video, which was played in Kenyan media houses.

We had shot the music video at the Kakuma Refugee Camp, which is in northern Kenya. At that time, it housed about 200,000 South Sudanese and Sudanese refugees. Just from being there, I saw the realities of the lifestyle of South Sudanese in Nairobi and that of my people the refugee camps were different. Being in Nairobi, the stories I got from South Sudanese were quite different from what I saw in the refugee camps. And I was shocked. The majority of the people I interacted with in Nairobi were students. The only stories we could tell are what we know of our parents and maybe from our uncles about that time. I wasn't getting the real horrific tales of the exact things that happened during war. In the camps, I met people who really experienced the war first-hand.

In the Kakuma Refugee Camp, I met people with bullet wounds, some were working with bullets still in their bodies. I met young people who from the tender age of eight years were forced into being child soldiers. I met others who spent so many years of their lives, their teenage lives, fighting and did not have the opportunity to go to school. They told me the stories of how they walked for miles, through different towns, for days, trying to look for shelter, to make it to Kenya, to safety. And when they arrived in Kenya, they took the opportunity to start school. Imagine being somebody at the age of 18 getting into grade one with seven- and eight-year-olds. It actually got me really worked up. It hit me that actually I am privileged to have really been safe in Nairobi. I decided that "You know what? My people have spent so many years struggling to make our country a better place. And I asked myself what can I do? How can I make a difference? What role can I play?" Then when I saw how my people reacted to our music. I saw their excitement about seeing one of their own being played in Kenyan media houses. I saw hope. I realized; you know what? I can actually bring hope to our people. I can do something. I can play a role.

Fast forward to the year 2010. With the independence referendum only one year away, in 2011, I saw an opportunity to make a difference. I was like, "All right. So many South Sudanese, over 2.5 million, have perished in the struggle. Right now, this is the time when all this struggle can mean something." With this possibility of independence, I decided to use my influence in Kenya to mobilize the South Sudanese, who were also being given the opportunity to vote in the referendum. I decided to play a role in ensuring that as many of the South Sudanese refugees would know about the referendum and actually go vote. First, I travelled to Juba,

South Sudan, to educate myself about the referendum, the peace agreement, and the referendum process itself. I also went deep in Sudan, to my village. That was my first time to actually be in what would become South Sudan and to just meet the people, to see their living conditions. It motivated me more.

When I came back, I started a campaign called *Freedom Walk Door-to-Door Campaign*. I soon realized there was a lot of work to do. I could not do it myself. I decided, you know what? I'll mobilize South Sudanese artists and I will train them on the referendum. We will go door-to-door to South Sudanese houses in Kenya, talk to them about the referendum, and encourage them to vote for separation from Sudan. I had just released an album one year earlier. I used the income from my album sales to move and transport ourselves through all the places that are densely populated with South Sudanese in Kenya. In Kenya there are about five towns that house the South Sudanese population. And in those towns, our people have this tendency to live in the same estates and neighbourhoods. That made the work easier for us. We would go to a different estate, get one South Sudanese resident who will take us to the other houses. We did that for about three or four months.

I remember there was fear from many refugees that their vote would not be respected. They actually thought their vote would be stolen. They did not feel that they should vote and validate the election as legitimate. They thought that by voting, they might actually be supporting those who would steal the election. I remember vividly a lot of people changing their mind after we managed to go to the houses and just speak to them about the importance of voting. We told them that "The more of us vote, the better. If the majority of us vote for independence, there is absolutely no way that they could steal all our votes." We put into our campaigns the message that people now had the power to determine their future. These are people who for years felt powerless. And finally, they had an opportunity to make a difference. This was really our only chance. During that time, I heard again stories, personal stories, from people in the hospital about the horrific experiences they had trying to leave Sudan. They may have had to walk for weeks, months, experiencing a lot of violence. When they find out that by just voting they can actually end the rule of the government, end all the trauma, they feel very empowered. I saw a lot of excitement.

And it worked. Kenya had the highest number of voters outside of Sudan. I actually remember the day of the vote, January 9, 2011, I was seeing lines of people waiting to vote. People were excited because for the first time they had power to change the government. In fact, the South Sudanese in Kenya were the largest diaspora voting in the referendum. That was significant to us. We found that, okay, people actually heard us. People actually wanted to be part of this

national duty. That was the first and last time for our people to actually participate in a serious democratic process. Before then, there was a national Sudanese election in 2010, but that wasn't really just us, the South Sudanese. The 2011 referendum was the first process where South Sudanese came together and actually decided to participate in a democratic process. The results were that about 98% voted for independence. And once we got our country, now we had a lot of hope, and we felt that now it's time to actually build and to enjoy the reward of the victory that our people had after so many years of struggles. So, I moved to Juba.

**Parks:** *When you moved to Juba, did you think your advocacy days were over? What type of future did you imagine for yourself? For your country?*

**Mathiang:** One week after the vote, I travelled to Juba, South Sudan. I remember at that time; I was so filled with excitement. At the time, I thought my role would be different. I had studied marketing management and I thought, you know what? I can offer some marketing skills to South Sudanese. So, I formed a company called *Marketing Solutions*, which offered marketing consultancies services. At that time, I thought my activism was done. But one year down the line after independence, I realized things weren't moving as smoothly as we thought. The economy started declining. Violence began to rise. But at the time, I remember thinking that, you know, this is just a small mistake. People will come back to their minds. They will go back to the drawing board to find a better way. But the violence escalated into a civil war. And the biggest disappointment was the people who started the war that has destroyed our country are the people that we considered our heroes. These are the people that worked for our independence, for our freedom, for our peace. Worked to let us just enjoy our country. These same people, after struggling for so many years to win this beautiful country, were destroying it.

When we voted for independence, we were not voting just for an independent country. We were voting against arbitrary arrests. We were voting against oppression. We were voting against all sorts of suffering that our people experienced. We were voting for a million freedoms. We were voting for us to really feel free in our own country. But, one year down the line, we started seeing some of the same behaviour that the regime in Khartoum was doing, like journalists being harassed. And initially we thought, okay. This is just something that might pass. Maybe the policemen are still acting as if this was Sudan. They still have that pre-independence culture in their mind. But then things started getting worse. We started seeing journalists actually being killed and a lot of arbitrary arrests.

Now in 2015, we were supposed to have our first election as the nation of South Sudan. Due to the conflict that erupted in 2013, which started as a disagreement within the ruling party, the South Sudan Peoples' Defence Forces, the election was postponed. So, we, as a country, we, as a people were not able to participate in an election. Instead, there was a peace agreement in 2015 that was signed by the warring parties called the *Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan*. One of the main points was that after three years, the ruling parties will take the country into an election process. Then, one year later in 2016, the conflict erupted again, which again postponed any process for the citizens to participate in the decision-making of what we wanted for the future of South Sudan.

Then in 2018, the warring parties signed the revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict, which promised a national election in two years. Again, we thought we'll have an election, only now in 2022. The election date was then extended into the future once again. Then in February of this year, the government decided to have a national election in 2025. But we realized that the government leaders are actually trying to continue postponing and postponing the election. They want to continue enjoying being in power when they know people don't want them. It was during this period when I realized, you know what? We are still not yet free. Our liberators became our oppressors.

In 2014, my son was born in Nairobi. It hit me that he might grow up in a foreign country just like I did. I decided that I want to make this country better. I want my son to enjoy South Sudan. I want him to know that he's South Sudanese. If I want him to feel South Sudan. I want him to experience South Sudan. And at some point, I also want him to go to school in South Sudan. But when the conflict erupted and everything was a mess, I gave myself a task. I told myself that for my son to enjoy this country, I have to make this country of Sudan the country that my children will feel pride in. I keep telling myself that one day that my kids will ask me, "Okay. All this mess that we are experiencing now, what did you do to try and fix it?" And that is the point in which I decided that I will really dedicate my life to trying to address what I see as incorrect in our country. That's when I realized, you know what? We are still not yet free. Our liberators became our oppressors. In 2015, I closed my company and returned to activism.

**Parks:** *Once you decided to return to activism, what did that look like? How did you go about deciding the first set of steps? How did that lead to the formation of #Anataban?*

**Mathiang:** Now, I'm going to be an activist and I asked myself these questions: What am I standing for? What role do I have? What skills would I use? Who will I work with? I realized that I had music. I know how to market stuff. And I was like, I've used my music for advocacy

before. Then I asked myself, “What am I advocating for?” I want peace. The biggest problem we are facing right now, as a people, is that we keep on being displaced. We keep on being killed. The dignity of our people is being shredded every day.

And that is when, I remember I was actually in my room at that time, I told myself, "You know what? Let me start up something." I started up a campaign on social media first, as I was still trying to figure out what to do. The campaign was called, it was a *#WaveSouthSudan*. I realized there was a lot of hate and incitement online, that politicians had divided the people. The people couldn't see anything that brings them together, anything that they have in common. So, at that time, I just asked people to do one simple thing. I asked the citizens to take a photo of themselves with the flag because I realize people like taking photos. I asked citizens to just take cool photos of themselves with the flag and write something unifying as a caption. Then just post with *the #WaveSouthSudan* hashtag. I wanted the flag to become a unifying symbol. Soon *#WaveSouthSudan* was all over social media space. That campaign just brought a different vibe to the environment, especially for those who did not want to participate in the conflict conversations, the war conversations. It was a chance to bring something different. And it somehow started the process of getting people to actually cool down when it comes to the incitement that was happening in the social media.

*#WaveSouthSudan* was really just a short campaign, but I was going broke because there was no money that I was actually earning from it. So, after that, I joined the *DefyHateNow* initiative, which was also a campaign aimed at combating online hate speech and incitement to violence. I was one of the social media analysts. I also helped in workshops and training to get more people to join the campaign. We were doing a lot of work. But, again, whenever there was a fresh attack in a specific area, we saw social media again going back to the same people, going back to the same hate filled debates. So when, in 2016, after the conflict erupted in Juba, I was really furious.

By that time in 2016, there was an international organisation in Juba called *Norwegian People's Aid* (NPA). There was a call for proposals, “Arts for Change,” which allowed different artists to apply for small grants. When the conflict happened, NPA wanted to cancel that initiative. By that time, they had moved to Nairobi. I came to Nairobi, and I met them. They told me how they did not see any reason for the “Art for Change” initiative anymore. But after some deliberations, it was now decided to do the workshop and see where it goes. So, they funded 19 artists and myself to meet in Kenya. Many of these artists had really seen the war in Juba. There was a lot of mistrust. There was a lot of sadness. There was a lot of anger. They had been chased. They had seen people getting killed. One of the artists had just buried his



bandmate, who was also his cousin. Almost all the artists when they came just wanted to get out of the country. They really were stressed at that time. They did not know what to expect from the workshop. Actually, one of the ladies, after the workshop, decided to get in a bus with all her belongings. She had given up on South Sudan. She was going to Uganda to start up a different life.

Luckily for us, we had a facilitator who was a Kenyan activist named Boniface Mwangi. He started his activism after the independence election while still in Kenya. He told us his story, then he asked each of us to tell our own story. After everybody told their stories about the war, we realized, “You know what? We are all facing the same problem.” That actually helped build trust. From that, we decided to do something. What the organisers had in mind is they have this workshop, then later the artist will go back and do their own performances individually. Well, let you know what? Right now, we have an issue. There is a war that is happening. Yes, you have your plans, but we request this time let us discuss our problem and what we can do as artists to make a difference. We spent the next three days discussing South Sudan and what role we can play artists as well as what campaigns we can do collectively.

During those three days, we realized one of the main issues was that the media are focused on telling the government narratives and the rebels' narratives. We realized there was nothing coming from the people. We wanted to change the narrative. We want the world to know what the citizens feel. But at that time the civic space was really closed down. Everybody was really scared of talking, although they had a lot to say. We decided to create a platform which was meant to be a temporary loose campaign that everybody could join. We came up with the hashtag *#Anataban*, which is Arabic for “I am tired.” It was not meant to be a movement at that time. It was just meant to be a loose campaign where everybody can join in, where every South Sudanese can share in their frustrations. Our goal was to control social media so the world can see a different narrative. Let the world see that actually the citizens are not in support of any of the warring parties. The South Sudanese just wanted peace.

We did a song and a video in the workshop about *#Anataban* that went viral. We realized that, you know what? We now got one of the main things that we wanted to achieve - the attention of the citizens. We got citizens to rally behind a specific campaign. We start getting more feedback from the citizens who wanted us to go to the ground, that is in South Sudan, and mobilize the citizens who are not also online to speak up and continue to pressure the warning parties to actually stop the war. And to our surprise, in a short time, more artists reached out to us and wanted to be part of the campaign. Then in about four months, we realized we were



going to have to lead a movement. That we had no choice since there was pressure from more people who wanted to act.

But we wanted to control what happened. And by that time, some of the movements that we were studying included the Black Lives Matter. And we had questions like “How did they manage to take BLM from this loose campaign to becoming a movement? How do they control the narratives? How do they control the members to ensure that the messaging is the same? How do they handle the spoilers and all of those who would want to use the campaign for different other agendas?” At that point we decided that the artist that wants to join us will have to go through the same workshop process as we experienced. We wanted to know who they were, that they knew our values, that they knew how to act within those values. We wanted to know “who is who” and what role we can give which artist to play. And from there, *Anataban* grew to over 1000 artists.

I had been taking a lead role from the initial stage of the campaign to the beginning of the movement. I was the Initiative Coordinator, so I found myself being in the front lines. We had started doing a lot of concerts in the neighbourhoods. But it was really a mixture of concerts and rallies. There would be a lot of music and dance, but there would also be times when we will speak to the people. There would be times when we get people to speak and share their views. Now initially, the authorities brushed us off for just being artists. Then they realized that we were all over the media and that what we were saying was contradicting what they were saying. They realized more and more citizens were attending our events, where more and more citizens started to speak up. Now they had a lot of citizens challenging their thoughts. Then our activities began to include murals. So there began to be a lot of murals all over the streets. We had created platforms where people spoke. And there was no other platform where people were actually expressing themselves. At some point the authorities realized, “Ah, these guys are actually becoming powerful and dangerous. They could rally the citizens against us.”

**Parks:** *I’m wondering why you did not call your events political rallies, since that seemed to be what was occurring. And once the authorities decided they were, in fact, “political rallies,” what impact did that have on #Anataban?*

**Mathiang:** When you call an event a “political rally,” the authorities will pay attention immediately. But when you are just calling it a concert, they’ll be like, “Ah, those people are just going to dance and sing.” But our events, our concerts, were also places where people could speak and what they said will be documented and shared. What happened was, the

authorities saw our numbers increasing. In our events, we had over 15,000 young people attending. They realized that this is a problem. That's when started calling us in for meetings to understand our ideologies. And we were like, "We just want peace, and we want to enjoy our country." Then they asked us, "Who are you? What are you doing? You're not a registered body. This is a sensitive time. You have to register." So, we registered as an NGO. Then they started attending the events. They started following every mural that we were doing. And they realized too late, even after registration and all, that the actual name of the movement was itself a protest because it was, *#Anataban*, "I am Tired." That was the name of the movement. It was something that many South Sudanese resonated with. Then they started cracking down on some of our members who we gave our t-shirts to wear. We also printed a lot of t-shirts to give out at performances in the neighbourhoods. Our t-shirts seemed to be everywhere. So, they started cracking down on anybody in our T-shirts, hoping to try and understand what *#Anataban* was doing.

By 2017, the authorities had launched peace talks that led to the revitalized agreement. When the talks began, *#Anataban* started a campaign called *South Sudan is Watching*, which influenced the peace process. It was a very simple campaign, here we just asked people to take photos wearing sunglasses. We then edited the national flag onto the sunglasses, which just looked cool. In the process, we also asked them to write a message directly to those at the negotiating table stating their expectations from the talks. We also did billboards and even concerts right before every negotiating session. We also held these events in different parts of South Sudan as well as in refugee communities in Ethiopia, and Uganda. Now the negotiators were paying attention. Even some of the politicians mentioned the *South Sudan is Watching* campaign, "We are hearing South Sudanese saying that they are watching us, so we need to act on what we are doing." At some point we created a painting, printed copies of it, and distributed it to all those who were attending the negotiations. It was a powerful painting that represented what South Sudanese are actually desiring and it influenced the peace talks.

But after they signed the peace agreement, we started seeing the authorities coming after us more vigorously. They started to ban our activities. They harassed some of our most outspoken members. There was one woman artist. She was really powerful. She was a good speaker and really influential. They sent people to follow her around, to let her know she was being watched. It was meant to intimidate her. She had to flee and is now living in exile. They would also just identify people who they thought were really influential in the movement and find ways of threatening them. And then we also come after in our offices. They would send infiltrators. We would identify them and give them roles to play. And we will let them know

what we want them to know. We let them see and feel that we have many members. Then they began breaking into the office, stealing the laptops. Sometimes they would even climb up to the billboards and just disfigure the billboard for us to see. Or when we do murals, they will come and just splash paint on it, then call us in for questioning and warn us about painting on walls.

At some point, they became confused about who to arrest. At that time, we always claimed that we don't have a leader. In a real sense, the members knew that I was leading them, but we would tell people we have a horizontal leadership structure. Plus, It took them a lot of time to really understand us. At the end of the day, sometimes the authorities will see the logistics coordinator giving speeches or the guy doing finance training the people on movement building. As a result, for a long time, they do not really know who the leaders are or how many members were in *#Anataban*. Once they now realized who are actually the people who are running and influencing the movement, that's when they started coming individually at us.

And the last person who they really came after was me. And that was when I was no longer part of the movement. I had stepped down from my position in *Anataban*. When I stepped down, I actually thought to myself, "I think I've done my part. Right now, I want to go back to pick up from where I left with marketing solutions." That is what I was doing from the time I stepped down. I was actually planning on shifting from activism to business. The security agencies actually summoned my former colleagues to three different meetings. The agenda was simple, "What is Manasseh doing now? What is this Marketing Solutions?" There were not buying the fact that I was now a businessman. There was that assumption that I'm planning on something dangerous.

At this point, a group called *The People's Coalition for Civic Action* "PCCA" was formed. *The People's Coalition for Civic Action* is a collective that brings together activists who believe in non-violent action and would want to mobilize the citizens of South Sudan to really engage closely on issues in the country, especially the peace agreement. So, in the month of August, *The People's Coalition for Civic Action* made a call to the citizens of South Sudan on what they call the *National Day of Awakening* which was to happen on the 30th of August 2021. It was meant to be a day where the citizens of South Sudan will go to the streets and demand the leadership of the country to either implement the peace agreement or step down because there was nothing moving when it comes to the implementation of the agreement. And that got us into trouble.

After the *Day of Awakening*, there was a crackdown on activists who were suspected to be part of the coalition. There were four representatives who were known to have signed the document. Three of them fled the country. One remained, Governor Kuel, and was arrested. Since I was known by the authorities to be at the centre of mobilizing people in different protests that have happened before in the country, I was automatically one of the main suspects. I was targeted. I started getting phone calls from different people warning me. Some of them would tell me, "You know what? Your name is being mentioned frequently." I had stepped down from #Anataban in April 2021 and by September, I had to flee South Sudan. Then last year, there was a case brought against six of us. They arrested Governor Kuel, but his case was dropped by the court because of lack of evidence. He just called for the citizens to non-violently go to the street and demand that the government implement the peace agreement. For the rest of us, our case is still pending. The judges asked the court to present us for the case to continue.

**Parks:** *At this point, being a refugee again in Kenya, did you consider stepping away from activism? What led you to continue to fight for your country's future?*

**Mathiang:** Prior to leaving South Sudan, threats to my life were increasing, and people around me would encourage me to choose a different path as I had a family to raise. My family is growing, I was in a foreign country when I had not planned on coming back to Kenya. But now it is worse. When we got to our country, I never thought for a second that a day would come when I left my country again. I could not imagine continuing to be an advocate. Earlier, though, I had been contacted about the Oslo Freedom Fellow program, which provides support for advocates to gain skills to work on political rights in their country. I had been accepted into the program. Interestingly, the same day I was running away from South Sudan was also the same day the fellowship was starting. After I got into Nairobi, I started attending all the meetings. I got a lot of comfort from the meetings. I got a lot of ideas. I got a lot of encouragement as I met other activists around the world who were also going through so much. It re-ignited my passion.

Next year we are meant to have the first democratic elections since independence in 2011. Currently, in South Sudan there is no government official who is elected. Everybody is nominated and appointed, the MPs, the members of parliament, the governors, everybody is nominated by the parties. We worry that for sure this election may not be free and fair. There is absolutely no way that the election will be free and fair. Our people have a tendency of always reacting in violence. And if we are not careful, we will have violence that is worse than what we've been happening in 2013 and 2016. We feel like this authoritarian regime that we

have right now, in the coming year, will really instigate a lot of violence. They will also make life difficult for the citizens of South Sudan. The political space will keep on shrinking and there will be more attacks on activists, politicians, and the media.

**Parks:** *What are your strategies for diminishing the chance of violence?*

Through *Hagiga*, I'm trying to encourage non-violent action. I've been doing a lot of training on nonviolent action and public narrative. I believe that through our stories that we motivate the citizens to first of all shun violence. Every South Sudanese has a story to tell. We are cultured in our country to really hide or contain our pain. We are not encouraged to really speak up. You are not allowed to correct your elder. That is an abomination. You find that many people would not want to correct people in authority. And that has played a role in how our people suffer but do not really speak much on it. We can motivate citizens to speak their views on different issues. To be able to speak to their leaders. And through *Hagiga*, we are asking citizens to take less than a minute to speak directly to their leaders about how they're feeling about the nation across as many social media platforms as possible. We want them to especially focus on their elections and why they want a peaceful election. The main aim is just to try and encourage the people to be bold in speaking out.

The approach that we have been using, getting people to share their voices, is to encourage them to understand you can speak to your leaders, to your elders without being disrespectful. Say my name is Ladu. He might make a short message that states, "I am a student, but right now because of the conflict, I have challenges. I am looking forward to a peaceful election. Please do not take us back to war." Or maybe my name is Amina. She might say "During the conflict I lost my brothers and sisters. Right now, I do not have anybody to help me when it comes to taking care of my kids. I am scared that this election might lead to conflict. You think of us, you think of me, do not take us back to war."

These are short messages. But the more voices that we have speaking, the more powerful it will be in the long run. And the messages will not be aggressive messages because we want to keep these people safe. And right now, one of the main issues that we are facing is the aggression of the authorities. People are really in fear. They really don't want to talk about what's going on. They don't want to talk about the abuses that they're getting from security forces. They don't want to talk about how they are unsure about what will happen if the election takes place in November 2024.

**Parks:** *You stated your belief the elections will not be fair, but do you think the government is even ready to hold an election?*

Right now, we do not have a permanent constitution. The process to make a permanent constitution is just beginning. We don't have an electoral act. We also don't have political parties act. Parliament is just working on reviewing that bill. All this is still being worked on. So, when it comes time for the election, we'll have to have the electoral code first, then political party legislation, so that political parties can start registering and candidates can start declaring interest. The security sector reform was also to be done but it's a total mess. So, we are not sure if the security force that we have right now can ensure that the elections will be peaceful. The electoral commission also needs to be reconstituted. We need to start the process of getting them appointed and trained. This is time that we really don't have. we really do not have. We have not talked about voter registration and how that was to happen.

The judiciary is also an issue, our judiciary is weak now and does not have the capacity to. Imagine when it is election time. Right now, we have 1000 state members of parliament and 555 national members of parliament. That's 1,555 members of parliament. And then you have 10 governors and all the commissioners. Finally, add on the presidential campaign. Even if you just have 200 people who are not satisfied with the election, do they have the capacity to handle those cases? Plus, all the other cases that are happening in the country. I'm sure when people are unsatisfied, they might decide to take up arms because they will not feel like the judiciary is capable of resolving their issue.

**Parks:** *You have spoken powerfully about the ability of South Sudanese to create change in their country, from the initial independence election, to campaigns like #Anataban, and now, Hagiga. You have not spoken as much about the global community's responsibility to South Sudan or, really, any country suffering under authoritarian regimes. Do you see a role for the global community in this election?*

In the upcoming elections, we would like to see the world supporting citizen initiatives. There are many brave citizen initiatives that lack adequate resources to do their work in ensuring the elections are free and credible. The South Sudan civil society under difficult conditions are trying their level best to ensure the election is done correctly.

secondly the government has asked the United Nations to assist in facilitating the election, the United nations could play a critical role in ensuring the elections is fair and reflects the desires of the people of South Sudan

**Parks:** *And similar to the independence election, I would think there needs to be support of refugees returning to vote in the election.*

There are over 1 million South Sudanese who are refugees in foreign countries or internally displaced. Chapter five of the Agreement on the resolution of conflict in South Sudan talked about repatriation of displaced persons, and they ought to be repatriated so as to participate in the elections. However, it is important that they only return when they feel safe enough to. So far, the government has not convinced the citizens enough that they are committed to ensure their safety. So, an alternative is to ensure refugees are allowed to vote from the refugee camps and internally displaced camps.

**Parks:** *With the election upcoming and years of advocacy work, what is your sense of the future of South Sudan? Are you optimistic?*

Many times, I want to give up, but then I see the state of our country. I see how everything is getting worse. I look at my children. They are growing up in a foreign country. I fear for them. I fear for their future. I feel that it's my responsibility as a father to ensure that home is safe for them. The way things are going right now, the future does not look so bright for my children.

We are in a time in South Sudan where we cannot waste. It's been difficult for me. My family does not understand sometimes why I feel it's my responsibility to save the country. I've had opportunities to leave. I have been asked if I am interested in getting asylum in other countries. I have refused. I have decided to live just nearby in the region because I feel like there's still a lot of work for us to do. I know it's dangerous. It might mean years of imprisonment. I know it might mean my life. But again, I don't see I have much choice. If I don't do anything now, then five years from now I will regret it. That's what I don't want to do.

Right now, South Sudanese are uncomfortable. You see, the thing is, we all want to just sit down and enjoy life, but we can't. Life is not comfortable. Things are getting worse every day. The economy is crashing every day. It's very difficult for people to survive, just to have their daily meals. It's a problem. And last December, the World Food Program (WFP) announced that over 90% of the population will need support from their food donation program. 90% Can you imagine? And because of the war in Ukraine, the WFP announced that they have a shortage of food. The WFP is saying 90% of the population will need donated food, but that



the WFP does not have the food. So, the people are suffering. There are no jobs. There is insecurity. They don't see the government having any plan or any desire to implement peace. The people just want to make a life for themselves. There's no way the people will sit and just watch the country continue this way.

I also know right now the young people in South Sudan are determined to make a difference. Since last year, I've been engaging with a lot of young people. I've been training young people in nonviolent actions and organising. I was privileged to get some training in nonviolent strategies through the Oslo Freedom Fellows Program. I've been using that training, teaching young people those skills. And many of these young people are right now doing amazing things on the ground. They're using different approaches from the ones used by my generation. They're smarter. They're wiser than we are. They are also really being effective. They're from different parts of the country. They have more energy. They believe that we can make a difference. These are the people that I'm working with right now. I am hopeful.