On March 12, South Sudanese President Salva Kiir unveiled the new unity government, implementing a peace agreement negotiated with Vice President and rebel leader Riek Machar. This watershed event came one day after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The outbreak of the disease has heavily impacted South Sudanese politics, with dozens of senior elites testing positive for COVID-19 and the sharp fall in global oil prices threatening the country’s budget. The spread of the coronavirus therefore risks exacerbating simmering tensions, putting further pressure on the fragile political settlement.

Tensions have arisen in UN-protected camps over the proposed repatriation of IDPs to their home communities. The spread of the virus inside overcrowded camps - for which foreign troops were blamed - led army soldiers to restrict movement from and to the sites, occasionally beating residents attempting to leave Malakal camp.

In May, retaliatory violence between armed Lou Nuer and Murle pastoralists killed hundreds in eastern Jonglei State, an area hit by floods last year. These groups regularly fight over cattle raiding and access to grazing land and water. UN's reconciliation efforts have failed to restore peace, also due to a political stalemate postponing the appointment of governors.

Political instability may increase if the pandemic continues to sweep across South Sudan’s elderly elite. Plunging oil revenues could stir unrest in urban areas and mutinies among army soldiers.

During the first five months of 2020, intercommunal violence was responsible for more than half of total civilian fatalities in South Sudan. Ethnic and communal militias have killed at least 134 people in attacks against civilians nationwide, while hundreds more have died on May 16-17 amid clashes in flood-hit areas of Jonglei State (see top right text box).