

COMMENTARY

The Political Crisis in South Sudan

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The political crisis in South Sudan is now more than a year old, with no immediate end in sight to the fighting between armed factions. What began as a power struggle within the ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), reignited factional fighting within the army, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), in December 2013. Both the political and military crises had their origins in unresolved tensions following the split in the SPLM/A in the 1990s and the incomplete integration of opposed factions into the army following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 (see Johnson 2014). Many South Sudanese expected that these tensions would eventually erupt in some form of conflict following independence in 2011, but the rapid escalation and intensity of fighting has still taken them by surprise.

This commentary can give only the barest outline of a complex series of events motivated by a mixture of political disappointment, personal ambition, and ethnic rivalry. A more detailed reporting of various aspects of the crisis can be found in the updated reports of the Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan and human rights reports by Amnesty International, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, and the South Sudan Human Rights Commission (2014).¹

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The CPA was constructed around the assumption that John Garang would remain the leader of the SPLM/A, the head of the Government of South Sudan (GoSS), and the first vice president in the power-sharing Government of National Unity (GNU) with the National Congress Party (NCP) throughout the six-year interim period leading up to the South Sudanese independence referendum in 2011. His death in July 2005, three weeks after his inauguration as first vice president, catapulted two men into unexpected positions of power: Salva Kiir Mayardit, Garang's deputy, assumed the leadership of the party and his two constitutional positions, while Riek Machar, occupying the third highest position in the party, became vice president in the GoSS. Had Garang lived, it is unlikely that either man would have remained in their initial positions, as Garang was adept at moving potential rivals around, preventing them from entrenching themselves in positions of power within the party or the army.

Salva Kiir, a veteran guerrilla of the first civil war, was, along with Garang, the last surviving founder of the SPLM/A, all others having been killed in the fratricidal warfare that engulfed the SPLM/A during the 1990s (see Johnson 2011:ch.7). His survival was due, in part, to having kept aloof from the internal politics of the movement, seeing himself as a soldier rather than a politician. Tensions had arisen between him and Garang at the end of 2004, just before the signing of the CPA, and his future in a Garang-led government was uncertain.

Riek Machar had joined the movement from a civilian, rather than a military, background and broke with Garang in 1991 over personal and ideological differences. His attempt to lead a reformed movement failed, and in the end he was forced to fall back on the support of sections of his own Nuer people, a significant proportion of them coming from Khartoum-backed militias. Machar soon lost control over both the formal and informal armed bodies under his command. His rebellion disintegrated into internecine fighting among Nuer, with civilians being the main targets, a pattern that was to reemerge in his current rebellion (see Johnson 2009, 2011:ch.8). He reconciled with Garang in 2002, just as internationally brokered peace negotiations with Khartoum began, and was elevated to the number three spot in the movement's hierarchy.

Salva Kiir faced many challenges in forming a government to administer southern Sudan during the interim period prior to the independence referendum. As leader of the army, the party, and the government, he first appointed persons closer to himself than to Garang, some with strong ties to Khartoum, leaving many of the SPLM stalwarts—"Garang's Orphans"—marginalized within the party and government (see Nyaba 2011). A number were brought back into central positions midway into the interim period as relations between the SPLM and the NCP in the GNU worsened over issues of oil, the undefined North–South boundary, and the disputed Abyei area (see Johnson 2008, 2010, 2012). As far as internal security was concerned, the president sought to conciliate the Khartoum-backed mainly Nuer militias by absorbing them into the SPLA with offers of promotions to their

officers and salaries to the rank and file. Initially successful, this strategy only stored up problems within the army as former enemies remained only incompletely integrated, the balance of loyalties shifted, and mini-rebellions were contained only by offering the same inducements of promotion and cash (see LeRiche & Arnold 2012).

The SPLM's political priorities shifted under Salva Kiir, away from Garang's vision of a "New Sudan" united under a secular state and toward the independence of South Sudan only. This involved the decision that SPLM candidates would not contest the 2010 presidential and national parliamentary elections and outwardly abandoning the members of the SPLM and SPLA stationed in neighboring South Kordofan and Blue Nile, states that were not included in South Sudan's independence referendum. It also meant keeping the SPLM's own internal divisions quiet in a show of unity prior to the independence referendum.

With the referendum out of the way and independence internationally recognized, discontent within the party became more visible and vocal. John Garang's widow, Rebecca Nyandeng, was quite open in voicing her dissatisfaction with her husband's successor as leader of the SPLM/A. Riek Machar had announced his ambition to become president of the independent nation as early as 2008. He argued for presidential term limits to be written into the transitional constitution, but the new constitution gave the president considerable powers, while the office of vice president remained an appointed, not an elective, position. Some disappointed candidates in the 2010 elections formed their own breakaway movements, supplied with arms by Khartoum, and there were mini-rebellions in the oil-owning states of Upper Nile, Unity, and Jonglei. Battles of increasing brutality escalated between groups of armed civilians, especially between the Nuer and Murle of Jonglei, and the government responded with heavy-handed disarmament campaigns wherever they could not buy off the antagonists with further incorporation into the army.

Discontent with the lack of development, corruption within the party and the government, and continued insecurity in parts of the country became increasingly public in 2012–13 as the party carried out national and internal consultations to prepare its basic documents prior to its national convention scheduled for May 2013. Uncertainty about whether Salva Kiir intended to stand for reelection prompted not only Riek Machar, but also Rebecca Nyandeng and Pagan Amum, the party's secretary-general, to announce their intention to stand for election as party chairman, which would automatically make the winner the party's candidate for president. Many other officials were also dissatisfied with the sense of drift in both the party and the government and supported, with varying degrees of warmth, reforms proposed by Riek Machar and the other contenders for the leadership.

Relations between the president and vice president deteriorated, with the president beginning to feel isolated within the party: he viewed as disloyal anyone seen to be supporting the vice president's agenda. In a series

of moves throughout the first half of 2013 Salva Kiir stripped Riek of his delegated powers, removed various critics from positions of power within the government, dismissed Riek's cousin-in-law, Taban Deng Gai, as governor of the strategic oil-producing Unity State, and finally, on July 23, 2013, dismissed Riek and his entire cabinet and suspended Pagan Amum as secretary-general of the SPLM. This was followed in November by an announcement dissolving all political structures of the SPLM except for the chairmanship and the secretariat, thus depriving the president's critics not only of their positions in government, but in the party as well.

Salva Kiir's new cabinet included many nonmembers of the SPLM, persons who had no real power base in the party, and others whose main qualification was that they came from the same region as the president and were entirely dependent on him for advancement. Some were seen still to be close to Khartoum, and relations with the NCP government of Sudan began to improve, especially over security issues and ending Juba's support for the SPLM/A-North.

This political housecleaning paralleled an earlier large-scale forced retirement of senior officers within the SPLA, many with strong links to their former comrades-in-arms in the SPLM/A-North, now engaged in open warfare with Khartoum in Blue Nile and South Kordofan states. Some of the remaining Khartoum-backed rebel movements along South Sudan's border with Sudan made their peace with Juba and were brought into the army. The balance of loyalties in the army was now skewed away from long-term veterans of the movement and toward defectors with a history of disaffection.

These dismissals created a new coalition of internal opposition within the SPLM. Riek Machar, as the most prominent dissenter, became its figure-head, but the coalition was more united in its dissatisfaction with Salva Kiir than in support for Riek Machar's ambitions. Many, in fact, were old opponents of Riek, forced into an alliance by Salva Kiir's increasing authoritarianism and intransigence. They included former governors of Unity, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, and Lakes states as well as a defeated gubernatorial candidate from Central Equatoria; former ministers and senior figures in the army; members of John Garang's family and one-time close associates of Garang such as Deng Alor Kuol from Abyei. Ethnically they were diverse, coming from the three largest Nilotic groups of Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk, as well as some Equatorian peoples. Nevertheless, the majority were drawn from Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity states, the former strongholds of pro-Khartoum militias and Riek Machar's 1990s breakaway group. It was an unlikely alliance and proved to be an unstable one.

The events that led up to an outbreak of fighting in December 2013 are still disputed. On December 6, 2013, the dissident group held a press conference criticizing Salva Kiir's leadership of the party and the government. Some of the main criticisms, such as the marginalization of Garang's closest supporters and collusion with Khartoum, motivated the SPLM stalwarts in the group more than Riek, since he had once been Khartoum's chief

collaborator. Other issues, such as the president's increasingly autocratic behavior, policy drift, and a failure to combat corruption, were more broadly supported, though many of the dissidents themselves were accused of corruption. They called upon the president to convene a meeting of the SPLM Political Bureau (now dissolved) and announced a public opposition rally to be held in Juba on December 14. The SPLM Secretariat then announced that a meeting of the National Liberation Council (NLC) would be held on the same day. The public rally was postponed and the NLC meeting was opened by the president, who attacked Riek in his opening address, reminding the audience of his role in splitting the SPLM/A in the 1990s. Motions proposed by the dissident group were voted down and they boycotted the meeting the next day when the party's policy documents were passed without substantial debate.

On December 15 the president ordered the disarmament of the presidential guard, a combination of SPLA veterans and recently integrated Nuer militiamen, during which fighting broke out between largely Nuer and Dinka soldiers and spread to other garrisons around Juba. On December 16 Salva Kiir announced on television that an attempted coup had been foiled, and throughout the next few days security forces, including specially recruited troops from the president's home area, combed through different neighborhoods in Juba targeting Nuer civilians and arresting the opposition politicians. Mutinies of largely Nuer units in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity states followed in close succession and Riek Machar, now based in Jonglei, called on the army to overthrow Salva Kiir. Large groups of armed Nuer civilians were recruited into Riek's forces, and during several months of seesaw fighting in the three states large numbers of civilians were killed, often brutally. The SPLA received help against Riek's forces from units of the Ugandan army, already based in South Sudan as part of an anti-Lord's Resistance Army force, as well as the SPLA-North from neighboring Blue Nile state and the Darfur Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) allied to the SPLA-North in neighboring South Kordofan. The involvement of the latter led to the massacre of hundreds of Darfuri traders in Bentiu when it was briefly retaken by Riek's troops in April. Under intense international diplomatic pressure the opposing sides signed two cessation-of-hostilities agreements in Addis Ababa; both were repeatedly violated. Fighting paused only with the onset of the rainy season in May.

Salva Kiir and Riek Machar each accuse the other of initiating the fighting. Riek has denied that he attempted a coup, and the government has failed to provide compelling evidence to substantiate this claim. All the other alleged coup plotters among the political detainees were released, though the government claimed that it had not dropped charges against them. There is also very little hard evidence of an active coup plot, as opposed to an attempted coup. The counter claim is that the president planned a purge of political and military opponents through the recruitment of a special force from his home area, kept separate from the SPLA military command, and that the confrontation at the NLC in December was the

excuse for releasing them into Juba—“*Interahamwe* style” as one former political detainee put it—targeting Nuer civilians and the families of Nuer soldiers.

There can be no serious dispute of the role of government security forces in the murder of large numbers of unarmed civilians in Juba in December 2013, whether as a separate force under the president’s command or as part of the SPLA. That there was no active coup *attempt* is also indisputable. But this does not mean that there was no threat of some sort of military intervention against the government. After his dismissal as governor of Unity state in July, Taban Deng Gai is reported to have gone to Khartoum to raise support for Riek, repeating his role as Riek’s liaison with Khartoum during the early years of the SPLA split. Oil money that was supposed to be paid to Unity state during Taban’s governorship is now alleged to be supporting the activities of Riek’s SPLM-in-Opposition (SPLM-O). During the same period at least one member of the opposition to Salva Kiir spoke openly about keeping “all options on the table,” including some form of armed struggle. The speed with which a series of senior Nuer field commanders mobilized their forces against the government also suggests that at the very least some opposition military network had been put in place. We need no reminder in this centenary year of the outbreak of the First World War that planning for military contingencies can lead to miscalculations on all sides with catastrophic consequences.

Despite the comparison with the *Interahamwe* cited above, South Sudan is not yet on the brink of a Rwanda-style genocide, with all Nuer fighting all Dinka. Fighting has largely been confined to the three states of Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity where the legacy of interethnic fighting within the SPLA during the 1990s is strongest. There have been some revenge killings outside those states, but Nuer continue to serve in the SPLA, the government, and the civil service. A former Nuer militia in Unity state has been instrumental in supporting the SPLA against invading Nuer forces from Jonglei and Upper Nile. There have been opportunistic cattle raids between communities of neighboring states, but Nuer refugees have found protection in Dinka communities and vice versa.

Riek has committed some of the same mistakes that doomed his break-away movement in the 1990s. He very quickly lost control of his forces in the field by recruiting ill-disciplined armed civilian militias who have been responsible for some of the worst atrocities against civilians. Publicly he has proclaimed himself in favor of democracy and against dictatorship, but his main appeal has been to a sense of Nuer entitlement, cloaked in semireligious references to the nineteenth-century Nuer prophet Ngundeng. After the massacres of Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer, and Darfuri civilians by his forces in Malakal and Bentiu, he has very little that is positive to offer other South Sudanese.

Neither the government nor the opposition enjoys firm widespread support. Salva Kiir’s greatest appeal has been to his own Awan-Mou Dinka community from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state, but Dinka from other

communities continue to be among his strongest critics. The governors of Western, Central, and Eastern Equatoria, three of the states least touched by continuing ethnic violence, have pledged their support for the government, less out of loyalty to the president or the party and more in opposition to violent regime change. Nuer support for Riek has declined as they count the mounting cost of their own casualties. Most of Riek's former allies among the now released political detainees have distanced themselves from his armed rebellion and have refused to join the SPLM-O, preferring to remain as a third force. The satirical website "Saakam!"—South Sudan's answer to *The Onion* and *Private Eye* (motto: "Sharing news like it never happened, making you think like you count")—has highlighted the dilemmas of the political actors with fake headlines such as "SPLM to tighten membership rules, making resignation harder but more profitable," "Rebels to be more selective in welcoming white-collar defectors and 'armyless' generals," and "Earthquake rocks South Sudan capital, Equatoria governors deny responsibility."²

Both sides face increased diplomatic isolation. Riek's supporters present his recent tour of regional capitals as proof of his growing reputation as a state leader. Yet diplomatic sources cite his request for military support from Kenya and South Africa as evidence both of his lack of awareness of international realities and the extent of his self-delusion. Diplomatic support for Salva Kiir personally is also weakening. Even Uganda, his strongest regional backer, is now seeing him as a liability (see Radio Tamazuj 2014). So far tentative U.S. and E.U. sanctions against individuals have had little effect, but more robust sanctions against the main protagonists, if supported by neighboring countries, could have a sobering effect.

Prospects for an immediate peace seem as remote as ever. A CPA-style "power-sharing" agreement is unlikely to hold, considering that the current conflict is the result of the breakdown of a de facto internal power-sharing arrangement. Both Salva Kiir and Riek Machar stand accused of ultimate responsibility for widespread human rights abuses against civilians by their forces. This has undermined their legitimacy as national leaders in the eyes of many South Sudanese, yet an interim arrangement without them is, at present, unrealistic. A more practical approach might be to put in place an internationally enforced ceasefire first, giving time for a new political arrangement to be negotiated through a nationwide constitutional convention that includes more than just the current combatants. Ironically, before 1989 this was the SPLM's preferred option for ending its war with Khartoum and ushering in the "New Sudan." It is time for the SPLM's fractured leadership to work out how they can best create a "New South Sudan."

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Amnesty International (2014); UNMISS (2014); SSHRC (2014). For reports of the HBSA see, e.g., Small Arms Survey–Sudan (2014a, 2014b) and specific shorter reports from the same source on the conflicts in Upper Nile, Unity, and Jonglei states.
2. Loosely translated from Juba Arabic, "Saakam!" means "Say what?" See saakam.wordpress.com.