

## MAAPSS UPDATE

29 October 2021

### Ruweng Administrative Area

#### What's new in Ruweng ?

- The creation of Ruweng state in 2015 answered longstanding local demands for self-rule and independence from Unity state's powerful Nuer politicians.<sup>1</sup> The creation of the Ruweng Administrative Area (RAA) in February 2020, when South Sudanese President [Salva Kiir](#) returned South Sudan to 10 states, also responded to these demands. However, since its creation, the RAA has found itself without substantive autonomy, and in many respects, is more beholden to the Nuer politicians of Unity today than before 2015.
- In 2019, [Carlo Kuol](#), now the deputy commander of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) Division 4, and a loyal supporter of [Taban Deng Gai](#), moved his forces—comprising both National Security Services (NSS) and SSPDF—into Panakuach. Panakuach is a narrow triangle of land wedged between what were Abiemnom and Pariang counties, and which are now part of the area claimed by the RAA. The creation of the RAA did not affect this occupation. Panakuach has long been contested by the Dinka of Ruweng and the Leek Nuer of Rubkona. Kuol is a Jikany Nuer from Guit county, and his occupation of Panakuach is also a reminder for the inhabitants of the RAA of the bitter history of Nuer militia forces occupying areas of Ruweng during the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005). With the expected formal opening of the border crossing to Sudan at Panakuach coming soon, control of the area—and the tax revenues it brings with it—will become even more contentious.
- In June 2021, Kiir sacked the RAA's chief administrator, [William Chol Awalith](#), and replaced him with [Peter Monyjok Dau](#), who then filled vacant county and RAA administrative posts exclusively with Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) officials, overcoming a political impasse with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition SPLM/A-IO.
- Preceding Dau's appointment, in April 2021, violent youth protests occurred in Jamjang county, rooted in locals' anger towards what they perceived to be unfair hiring practices among international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) operating in the refugee camps of Ajuong Thok and Pamir. Though there has been no recurrence of these protests, demonstrations against the Arech petroleum company in October 2021, and an uptake in attacks by the host community on the aforementioned refugee camps of Ajuong Thok and Pamir, are indicative of a crisis of surplus labour in the RAA. Just as elsewhere in South Sudan, large numbers of young men, especially, find it impossible to make a viable life for themselves, resulting in growing violence and anger towards what they perceive as the exploitation of the resources of their area. This also increases the pressure on the humanitarian sector in the region—the primary provider of jobs in the east of the RAA.
- RAA self-rule has been blocked by a series of long-standing occupations of its territory. In the east, in Wunkur county, [Johnson Olonyi](#)'s Agwelek forces control much of the territory contiguous with Panyikang county.

On the border with Guit county, south of RAA, Taban Deng's forces maintain a presence at his farms in Manga, where there is also a long-standing territorial dispute with the Jikany Nuer. While recent government intervention has pressured—somewhat successfully—the Bul Nuer of Mayom county in northern Unity state, to stop raiding into Warrap state, no such pressure exists to stop them from attacking the Dinka-inhabited territory of the RAA. As a weaker political constituency, the Dinka of the RAA have suffered the consequences of repeated raids from Mayom.

### Why does it matter?

- Mono-ethnic administrative areas are an espoused desire in much of South Sudan. For instance, many Lou Nuer in Akobo county want something similar to the Murle Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). In a period of marked governmental crises in South Sudan, in which salaries are not paid, and the government has withdrawn from even the most minimal service provision, such autonomy heralds the promise of determining one's own affairs, independently from the priorities of Juba. The RAA is a cautionary lesson. Regardless of whether it has relative autonomy as an administrative area, it answers directly to the Office of the President, to which it is beholden. As such, the RAA is part of a broader pattern in South Sudanese politics, in which state-based and regional blocs are eroded in favour of a series of weak local actors, each dependent on the presidency. Far from producing more independence for the Dinka of Ruweng, the creation of the RAA has arguably made the area less powerful: more dependent on Kiir and with little influence on the broader politics of the region. Fundamentally, the creation of the RAA does not answer the central question for the Dinka of Ruweng: how are they to live peacefully with their Nuer neighbours?

There will be no meaningful independence for the RAA without co-existence with the Bul, Leek, and Jikany Nuer, on whom so much depends.

- Youth protests in Ruweng over humanitarian jobs going to Equatorians and non-nationals are indicative of a real crisis in South Sudan that will not be resolved via recent INGO schemes to 'localize' job hires. In the RAA, in the absence of a growing private sector, and given the collapse of the government as an employer of note, the humanitarian sector will increasingly bear the brunt of youth discontent, and be the locus of their claims to socio-economic rights.

### What does the future hold ?

- The RAA is riven by internal conflicts. The east of the administrative area is trying to monopolise control of NGO jobs and humanitarian resources, at the expense of the rest of Pariang and the refugees who are the putative recipients of aid. In the west, the Dinka of Aliiny county—amongst others in which oil fields are found—is trying to ensure that the community oil fund (should it finally come to pass) benefits only the immediate community around the fields. The creation of the RAA has not produced unity amongst its Dinka residents, but has rather created a tense political arena, in which the two major industries in the administrative area—oil and humanitarianism—have become the site of zero-sum struggles between communities, at the sub-sectional level.
- Taban Deng remains the most powerful political actor in the RAA. Almost everyone in the current regional administration owes their position or rank to his patronage. His dominance, however, does not create a unity of purpose. Taban Deng has skilfully set politicians against each other, mutually

weakening them, and making them ever more dependent on him and the favours of a select coterie of Padang Dinka politicians in Juba. Without a seat at the table in Bentiu, Unity state’s capital, and alienated from the Nuer politics in Unity, the increasingly factitious politics of the RAA will remain dominated by Taban Deng, and unable to realize the promise that independence from Unity proffered.

## Main Developments

### Background

In February 2020, when Kiir announced that the country would return from 32 to ten states, he also created three administrative areas—Abyei, Pibor, and Ruweng—in a unilateral move that angered the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO). The SPLM-IO saw the decision to create the RAA as a continuance of the tactics underlying the 28 and 32 states declarations, which had placed the oil fields of the majority-Nuer Unity state into a mono-ethnic Dinka area.

The RAA was created out of what were once Abiemnom and Pariang counties in Unity state and is composed of one municipality—Pariang town—and eight counties. It is mostly populated by the Alor, Panaru, and Paweny branches of the Padang Dinka, a riverine group that lives in areas along the waterways of the Sudan–South Sudan border region, including in Abyei, Renk, and Melut. The Alor Dinka largely live in the western part of the RAA (former Abiemnom county), and are traditionally the minor player to the Panaru Dinka of the east of the RAA (former Pariang county); the Panaru dominated the politics of the region during the second Sudanese civil war. The Paweny Dinka, the third section of the Padang Dinka in the RAA, are a numerically smaller section (also to be found in Pigi, a contested territory in Jonglei), and

traditionally occupy Wunkur county, in the eastern part of the RAA. However, since the beginning of the current civil war, Wunkur has been occupied by Johnson Olonyi’s Agwelek forces, forcing the Paweny into Bieh and the Pamir refugee camp.

The Padang of Unity state have long lacked the national political influence that Dinka groups in Bahr el Ghazal and Jonglei are often perceived to enjoy. In part, this is a question of demographic geography. Perched at the northern tip of a predominantly Nuer state, the Padang of Unity have little capacity to exert power in Bentiu without making tactical alliances with Nuer patrons.

This isolation has deep historical roots. During the second Sudanese civil war, the Ruweng area remained largely loyal to the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), while the rest of Unity state was carved up between Paulino Matiep’s Bul Nuer militias and the splinter SPLA faction commanded by [Riek Machar](#). Conflict around the oil fields in the west of Ruweng devastated the Padang community, while Khartoum-backed militias razed land and destroyed villages as part of scorched-earth tactics designed to consolidate government control of the oil fields.

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 did little to alter the basic political geometry of Unity state. The Padang complained that they could not get jobs in Bentiu, and found themselves alienated from decision-making in the state capital. This sense of alienation was compounded by the beginning of the South Sudanese civil war in 2013, when Pariang—now the capital of the RAA—was repeatedly attacked by the Nuer forces of the SPLA-IO. By January 2014, as during the second Sudanese civil war, Ruweng was confronted with largely hostile Nuer to the south.

For many in Ruweng, the South Sudanese civil war ended any possibility of co-existence with its more powerful southern neighbours; thus, self-governance was considered as the only way out of the political impasse of Unity state. The Padang in Ruweng had hoped that with political autonomy, greater control of the oil rents that issue from the fields in Ruweng would be possible, providing a Padang-majority administrative area with much needed revenue—revenue that had otherwise bankrolled politicians in Bentiu and Juba.

Such aspirations for self-governance were answered by Kiir's 28-state decree (October 2015) and then his 32-state decree (January 2017). Both decrees mandated the creation of a mono-ethnic Ruweng state for the Padang Dinka, composed of Abiemnom and Pariang counties. Both decrees were unpopular in the rest of Unity state, which saw them—not unreasonably—as an attempt to fragment the Nuer population, and shift the control of many of Unity's oil-producing areas into an exclusive mono-ethnic Dinka domain.

### **State administration**

While the creation of Ruweng state in 2015 was to herald a period of self-governance for the Padang Dinka, it instead exposed the degree to which administrative emancipation does not political autonomy make. The appointment of the administration in Ruweng state was long hamstrung by national-level conflicts over its composition, in which the SPLM-IO demanded representation in Ruweng, leading to a stand-off during which no state-level personnel were appointed. This stand-off lasted for the duration of the term of the first chief administrator of the RAA, William Chol Awalith, until Kiir fired him on 8 June 2021.

Awalith's successor, Peter Monyjok Dau, selected all eight county commissioners for the RAA, and appointed state-level ministers, all exclusively from the SPLM; the SPLM-IO

has no representation in the state. Dau was the deputy governor under Awalith, and was once an advisor in Ruweng state. For now, he has managed to overcome the political tensions that made Awalith's tenure as chief administrator so unproductive. However, while the RAA is in calmer national waters, this relative quiet has allowed for a series of internal tensions to manifest.

Dau, like Awalith, is an Alor Dinka from Abiemnom county. This represents somewhat of a departure from the regular politics of Ruweng. Throughout the second Sudanese civil war, and through the CPA period, Ruweng's political representatives were chosen from amongst the Panaru Dinka of Pariang, which remains the most powerful Dinka section in Ruweng. The choices of Awalith as chief administrator, and then Dau, were made partly to mollify the Alor Dinka, who have consistently complained of marginalization in politics at the state level. While Dau's appointment has indeed mollified the Alor Dinka, there remains a great deal of resistance to his reign from amongst the Panaru.

A more important fracture in state politics, however, is due to the geography of the extractive industry in Ruweng. The oil fields of the administrative area are located in the west, in Aliiny, Nyel, and Biu counties. According to the South Sudan Petroleum Act, five per cent of total oil revenues should go to local communities in oil producing areas: two per cent to the state government and three per cent to the communities themselves. There is a standoff between the oil producing counties, with Aliiny—where most of the oil is produced—arguing that money should be distributed proportionally to oil production, while Nyel and Biu argue that each of the three counties should receive one per cent of the revenue. Elsewhere in the RAA, a more equitable distribution of oil revenue throughout the administrative area is demanded. While, practically, the matter is

rather moot, as little of the money intended for such community funds appears to reach the intended recipients, the disagreement indexes a real divide in the politics of Ruweng.

If the politics of the west of the administrative area are preoccupied with the division of oil revenues, the politics of the east are determined by another lucrative enterprise: humanitarianism. Humanitarian services in the RAA are overwhelmingly concentrated in the east, around Pamir and Ajuong Thok refugee camps. Through an equity principle agreed with the humanitarian sector, buildings constructed for the refugee community (e.g., schools and health clinics), must be paralleled with similar construction projects for the host community. The east of the RAA relies on the presence of refugees, which provide a much more lucrative return than oil revenues that never leave Juba. This, because in addition to newly constructed buildings, refugee camps provide the host population with access to services that otherwise would not exist, and most importantly, cash income from jobs in the humanitarian sector. The east of the RAA then, has a parallel ‘extractive’ industry to the oil production of the west, predicated on mining resources from humanitarian operations. Just as for the oil industry, the composition of this industry is deeply contested. The Panaru subsections that inhabit Jamjang county, for instance (where the two refugee camps are located), have often insisted that only the Kwai Gorr and Ajang subsections should have access to jobs in the humanitarian sector, and that recent policies of localization put in place by INGOs should apply only to local residents, and not residents of the RAA at large.

### **Taban Deng Gai**

An even more controversial schism structures the political scene in the RAA, and is incarnated in Taban Deng Gai, the former governor of Unity state (2005–13), once the

right-hand man to Riek Machar in the SPLM-IO, and now a vice-president of South Sudan. A Jikany Nuer from Guit county, Taban Deng has long been the most influential politician in Ruweng, and his patronage has determined the political hierarchy of the area for the past decade. He is also widely disliked for his occupation of land in the southern reaches of the administrative area, and for pocketing much of Unity state’s oil revenue during his time as governor.

The Padang pact with Taban Deng began in 2010, during a contested gubernatorial election. Taban Deng had split from Machar in 2005, and was rewarded with the governorship of Unity; in Juba, Taban Deng was a useful presence, dividing the Nuer and acting as a bulwark against Machar in his home state. On the ground, however, Taban Deng became increasingly unpopular, partly because none of the oil revenues generated during the CPA period that should have gone to local communities in oil producing areas—according to the South Sudanese Transitional Constitution—were ever actually received. In the run-up to the 2010 election, sensing Taban Deng’s weakness, Paulino Matiep, the once-powerful Bul Nuer general, united with Riek Machar to support [Nguen Monyтуil](#) for the governorship. However, despite local support for Monyтуil’s candidacy, Juba intervened, making Taban Deng the candidate for the SPLM. Monyтуil declined to run as an independent, and so Matiep and Machar put their weight behind [Angelina Nyakwech Teny](#), the current minister of defence and wife of Riek Machar. The year 2010, in Nuer, is known as *Ruon Nyakwech kene Taban*: the year of Nyakwech vs. Taban.

This alarmed the Rek Dinka of Warrap state, who did not want to see a Machar victory, and therefore, along with the SPLM hierarchy in Juba, pressured the Padang Dinka to support Taban Deng against Nyakwech by evoking the horrors that followed the SPLA split in 1991 and the way that Panakuach was

occupied by Nuer forces during the 1990s. By making common cause with Taban Deng, or so the argument went, the Padang Dinka would finally have some political sway in Bentiu: they would become a crucial constituency for the governor amidst the fractured Nuer politics of the state. Taban Deng swept to power, with 80 per cent of the vote from Ruweng, and appointed [Stephen Mabek Lang Bilkuey](#) as commissioner of Pariang. Mabek Lang was from an important chiefly family, and was one of the leading SPLA commanders in Pariang during the second Sudanese civil war. However, the period from 2010–13 saw the Padang Dinka see little reward for their loyalty to Taban Deng, who failed to distribute oil revenues, occupied Padang farmland, and marginalized Ruweng in state-level decisions.

In 2013, Taban Deng reconciled with Riek Machar, dismissed Ruweng commissioner Mabek Lang, and joined the nascent SPLA-IO. Much of the Padang Dinka elite then swung the other way, with Awalith and Mabek Lang both backing the governor who replaced Taban Deng, Nguen Monyтуil. Throughout these political shifts, it is important to note that the Padang Dinka, in order to have any power at the state-level, were forced to make common cause with more powerful Nuer politicians. While Monyтуil appointed Mabek Lang as deputy governor (2013–15), Monyтуil's powerbase was much stronger than Taban Deng's and so Mabek Lang lacked the capacity to substantively influence politics in Bentiu; he died in Juba in June 2021.

Since 2016, and Taban Deng's effective reabsorption into the Juba government, he has regained his dominant position in the politics of Ruweng. Almost every single commissioner and governor of the area during the period 2016–20 is in some way allied, or owes their position, to Taban Deng. Crucially, several of the most important politicians in the administrative area specifically owe their ranks to Taban Deng's

negotiations when he joined the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in Government (SPLM-IG), and brought with him a number of loyalists, whose positions were inflated as a condition of consolidation. Important members of this group include William Chol Awalith, the former administrator of RAA; [Majok Dau](#), an MP from Jau Payam; [Chol Deng Akiir](#), the former speaker under the 32 states; and, most controversially, [Nadia Arop Duddi](#), the Minister of Culture, Museums and National Heritage, who, though she is Padang Dinka herself, is married to a Nuer from Koch County—a fact that, on the ground, makes her extremely unpopular in Pariang. Her unpopularity matches that of Awalith, whose mother is Bul Nuer.

If the substantive politics of Ruweng are a legacy Taban Deng's patronage, the rhetorical climate stems from populist dislike of him. Frequently, politicians will make a show of denouncing Taban Deng's influence in Ruweng. [Ayen Mijok Kiir](#), for instance, an MP from Aliiny county—which contains much of Ruweng's oil—drafted an audit report on the share of the oil that should go to local communities in oil-producing areas, but to little effect. The populist appeals of anti-Taban Deng politicians in Ruweng do not alter the basic political status quo in the administrative area, however, which is that one requires Taban Deng's patronage to get ahead.

### **Conflicts with other states**

Taban Deng's role in Ruweng is exemplified by two controversial land disputes. The first is in Panakuach, an area that connects Abiemnom and Pariang on the border with Sudan. It is what enables a contiguous RAA, but from the perspective of the Leek Nuer of Rubkona, who also contest the territory, it is a land corridor that enables passage between Bentiu and Sudan. The dispute between the two groups includes both the land corridor and the oil



fields of Aliiny. At present, Leek Nuer have settled in the area of Panakuach, which was a SPLA-IO stronghold during the South Sudanese civil war, and which was also occupied by Nuer militia forces during the second Sudanese civil war. In 2019, Carlo Kuol Ruai Kuonyi, a Jikany Nuer from Guit county, and the deputy commander of SSPDF Division 4 in Bentiu, moved forces—SSPDF and NSS—into Panakuach, scattering much of the Padang Dinka population. Kuol then began to collect taxes on the border trade with Sudan. This led to conflict with the-then executive director of Panakuach, who fled to Pariang. More recently, the new commissioner of Aliiny, appointed by Dau, has attempted to move to Panakuach, and also try to—thus far unsuccessfully—collect taxes, leading to conflict with Kuol. In this stand-off, the RAA remains militarily weak. The formal opening of the border with Sudan—meant to happen in October 2021—is likely to inflame tension in the area as Panakuach was meant to be included as one of the official border-crossing points. The opening of this crossing has been delayed. A military coup in Khartoum, and Abdallah Hamdok’s removal as Prime Minister on 25 October, adds further uncertainty to the border-opening timeline.

The military weakness of the RAA makes it a peculiarity in South Sudan. Administrative areas do not receive divisions of the SSPDF, though the GPAA has its own force, directly answerable to the Office of the President. Ruweng does not have such a force. During the South Sudanese civil war, Ruweng mobilized its own mono-ethnic ‘oil defence forces’ to protect against invasion. These have now—at least formally—been dissolved, though the organizational machinery remains for them to be remobilized if the need arises. The Division 4 force in Ruweng, Brigade 10, is led by John Koch, a Bul Nuer, whose appointment was not well received in Ruweng. Thus far, he has refused to intervene in the matter of Kuol’s occupation of Panakuach. Meanwhile, the oil fields in

Ruweng are under the exclusive control of the NSS, with only a minimal SSPDF presence. Such control reflects national, rather than local priorities, and the NSS commander at the oil fields is a Nuer from Akobo.

At present, the RAA lacks any sort of armed force that would allow it to respond to its more powerful Nuer competitors in the south and west. This weakness is exemplified by the RAA’s inability to do anything about the territories that are putatively within its borders, but continue to be occupied. Alongside Panakuach, there is a longstanding territorial dispute with the Jikany Nuer of Guit county about Manga, a garrison town created by Khartoum in the 1990s, where Taban Deng continues to run farms that were established when he was the governor of Unity state, and where he maintains military forces. Over the past years, Jikany Nuer have raided into Ruweng from bases at Manga.

In the west, Ruweng faces Bul Nuer raids from Mayom into what was Abiemnom county, including a road ambush in May of 2021, which killed six people. While considerable political pressure has been placed on Mayom county to cease raids into Warrap, including a deadly standoff between the bodyguards of the Mayom commissioner ([Manime Gatluak](#), brother to [Tut Kew Gatluak](#)) and Bul Nuer raiders early this year, no such pressure has been placed on the Bul Nuer to stop raiding into Ruweng.

The east of Ruweng is also occupied. Wunkur county, home to the Pamir refugee camp, has an exposed north-eastern flank, where several bomas have been occupied by Johnson Olonyi’s forces since he was forced out of the government coalition in 2015. Wunkur, which is contiguous with Panyikang county, the wellspring of Olonyi’s support, is now part of Olonyi’s expansive tax-and-trade commercial empire, while the Paweny Dinka residents of the area have fled to Biu and to areas around the refugee camps of Ajuong

Thok and Pamir, intensifying competition over land.

In many respects, it could be argued that the RAA is weaker now than it was as a part of Unity state. It has lost its ability to influence events in Bentiu—however slight that ability was—and remains dependent on more powerful Nuer politicians, while also remaining vulnerable to raids across its southern borders. The formal establishment of the RAA’s autonomy does nothing to lessen the centrality of its relationship with its Nuer neighbours.

### **Youth protests and humanitarianism**

As over much of South Sudan, government salaries are not paid regularly in Ruweng. Even when they are, the salary of a schoolteacher, for instance, is not sufficient to sustain a family. In the absence of any other major sources of employment in the RAA outside the oil fields, this scarcity of income has led, in many cases, to a single NGO salary often providing for up to twenty people, and thus greater pressure placed on the humanitarian sector as a major provider of livelihoods. In 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic and competing global priorities for donors increased the shortfall of funds for INGOs and UN agencies in South Sudan, tensions over humanitarian employment turned into protests.

After a water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) project was transferred from Samaritan’s Purse to the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in early 2021, the latter organization elected to not renew some contracts, including figures influential in the youth union in Jamjang. Local discontent swelled over IRC’s use of workers from elsewhere in South Sudan. The complaints focused on the hiring of personnel from Bor and the Equatorias, rather than employing—the protesters claimed—equally qualified local youth. Underlying these protests was the sentiment

that INGO staff from elsewhere in the country were controlling the hiring process at IRC. On 24 April, youth protesters sent a letter demanding that all humanitarian agencies evacuate Jamjang due to unfair employment practices. The next day, they led an assault on the IRC compound, demanding the immediate relocation of non-local staff (injuring several among them), prompting the deployment of Mongolian peacekeepers from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to reduce the tension.

Since this clash, INGOs have adopted several practices to address the concerns of the youth union: they have put up noticeboards on which jobs are advertised, rather than solely advertising online, which the youth claimed meant jobs were accessible only to those in Juba with decent internet connections. Many INGOs have also been assiduously adopting a policy of localization, though agreeing on what it means to recruit locally is deeply contested within Ruweng.

Fundamentally, these measures, as valuable as they are, will not alter the basic dynamics of the protests, which emerge in the total absence of government services and other forms of circulating capital in the eastern part of the RAA. The humanitarian industry is placed in the unenviable position of being made the locus of protests over socio-economic rights: the demand for employment is one for the capacity to live a flourishing life, and it is not one, given declining resources, to which INGOs can satisfactorily respond.

The initial protests took place in the void left by the non-appointment of county commissioners by Awalith. Subsequently, the local government—also reliant on humanitarian resources—has attempted to suppress youth protests by threatening the youth involved, and controlling the youth union election in July 2021, via intimidation and financing of their chosen candidate. The government-backed chairperson who won the



election is known as the ‘defunct chairperson’ among the youth of Jamjang, because of his efforts to quieten protests. While attempting to reign in the youth, the local government has also attempted to instrumentalize the consequences of protests by trying to control INGO hiring as much as it can via oversight mechanisms.

Government attempts to prevent youth protests are unlikely to be effective, as indicated by more recent events in October 2021, when youth protested the excavation of murram at Yida by the Arech petroleum company, which was using the earth to build laterite roads at the oil fields. According to the protesters, the company had failed to pay the community \$2.4 million for the murram. What unifies this protest with the earlier events at IRC is the sense among youth that they fundamentally have no say over what happens to the resources in their community, whether oil-based, humanitarian, or even the very earth on which they walk. This political alienation, coupled with a dire lack of prospects for the youth of the RAA, mean that protests will continue until this fundamental problem is addressed.

### **The refugee camps**

The RAA, along with Maban county in Upper Nile, contain the great majority of the Sudanese refugees who have fled renewed wars in Sudan’s southern peripheries. While Yida was opened shortly after conflict restarted in the Nuba mountains of South Kordofan in 2011, Ajuong Thok and Pampir, located further from the Sudanese border, are later additions—in 2013 and 2016, respectively—designed by the humanitarian sector.<sup>2</sup> Refugees in Yida were effectively forced to go to the two more southern sites recently, when INGOs ceased to provide services at the northern camp.

The relationship between the host community in Jamjang and the Nuban refugees is both

dependent and conflictual. Dependent, insofar as the community is reliant on the services provided for the refugees. There has been disquiet in the host community in Yida at the cancellation of services at the camp, given the effect it will have on the surrounding community. In Jamjang, while there is a principle of equity that means that hospitals and schools built for the refugees will also result in INGOs building equivalent structures for the host community, the government does not provide salaries for the teachers in these schools, and there are no medicines to be dispensed; the host community thus finds itself reliant on the same services as the refugees, while the parallel constructions made for the host community stand empty.

However, given the parlous nature of life in Jamjang, there is also considerable disquiet about what is considered an unequitable division of resources between refugees and the host community. This has resulted in violence. September 2021 saw repeated attacks on refugee compounds by local youth—only the latest spell of violence against refugees that has occurred in the area. The government has also pressured the humanitarian sector to privilege the local community. Under current practices, South Sudanese are offered contracts by INGOs, while the refugee population is only offered ‘incentive work’—temporary, short-term arrangements—which effectively creates a nationalized division of labour within the refugee camps, forcing refugees into a state of permanent uncertainty. Given the reductions in positions and funding amongst the INGOs, however, nationals have more recently felt the cost of this neoliberalization of the humanitarian economy, as they have been forced to take some of the temporary positions created by a supposedly-nationalized division of labour.

This fight for survival has negatively affected the Nuban community, who find it even more

difficult to get jobs, including casual labour positions. In addition, they now also struggle with reduced food rations and a relative drawdown of services at the camps. In theory, the refugees and the host community could be allies and such unity could lead to a successful labour struggle. Both are affected by the uncertain state of INGO employment, and both are reliant on the services that the humanitarian sector provides. The refugees feel they do not have the capacity to have a political voice in Jamjang because their position is too uncertain and thus, they are noticeable by their absence at the protests against INGO hiring practices. The refugees have become adversaries for the host populace, in a zero-sum fight for meagre resources that looks set to continue.

## Conclusion

The eventual appointment of county and state level positions in the RAA should have presaged a much-anticipated era of unity and self-governance in Ruweng. Instead, the territory is striated by internal disagreements over the distribution of resources, and hamstrung by military weakness and continued dependence on external Nuer patrons.

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<sup>1</sup> This text will use ‘Ruweng’ to refer to the area roughly conterminous with the current Ruweng Administrative Area, prior to its formation in 2020. Ruweng Administrative Area to refer to the administrative area created in February 2020, and Ruweng state to refer to

The formal autonomy of the RAA has seemingly done very little to lessen its dependence on Taban Deng, or its disadvantage relative to more powerful forces in Mayom and Rubkona counties. The creation of the RAA, an administration answerable only to the Office of the President, is part of a pattern of recent developments in South Sudan, in which the central government in Juba erodes regional and state-based forms of decision-making in favour of the creation of a series of weak local actors, each absolutely dependent on the capital. While the will to ethnic self-rule is a real aspiration voiced around much of South Sudan, it fundamentally doesn’t answer the question of how communities are to live with each other, a question that must be answered if lives are to prosper in Ruweng.

## Disclaimer

Information provided in this MAAPSS Update is sourced from field research conducted by Small Arms Survey and HSBA experts, including interviews with officials from the SPLM, SSPDF, SPLA-IO, local and state leaders, and other prominent officials both in and outside of South Sudan. Where appropriate, in-text links are provided for secondary source material.

the state created by the 28 states and 32 states declarations.

<sup>2</sup> In [June 2021](#), there were an estimated 85,000 refugees living the Ajuong Thok and Pamir camps, and 37,000 in Yida camp.