

The Conflict in Unity State

Describing events through 23 February 2016

From April to September 2015, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and associated militias rampaged through southern Unity state in the most destructive campaign of South Sudan's civil war so far. Since September, intermittent fighting has continued, as government forces have sallied out from bases in the towns of southern Unity, to collect food and attack units of the Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA–IO). In January and most of February 2016, however, the south of Unity state was largely quiet, as the principal arena of contestation between the two sides moved from the battleground to Juba, the national capital, and to a fight over the future shape of South Sudan. Elsewhere in Unity, the SPLA remains in command of the Dinka counties of Abiemnom and Pariang, the Bul Nuer heartland of Mayom county, and Bentiu, although SPLA–IO forces remain stationed in Rubkona and Guit counties, near the state capital.

Unity's apparent calm, however, is superficial and tentative, and none of the political problems that arose during 2015 have been adequately addressed. The peace agreement signed by both sides in August mandated that a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) be created by late November. Although President Salva Kiir of South Sudan finally appointed Riek Machar, the leader of the opposition forces, as 1st vice president on 11 February 2016, the TGoNU has yet to be formed, amid continuing disagreements over the demilitarization of Juba and Kiir's controversial new plan for the administrative map of South Sudan (see the map).

Unity divided

On 2 October 2015, Kiir issued a decree that divided South Sudan's ten states into 28 new states, modifying an initial proposal by the Jieng Council of Elders—an influential group of Dinka political leaders in Juba—that called for 24 states. In general, Kiir's decree isolated Nuer communities in their own states, in a form of ethnic balkanization, while creating majority-Dinka states that subsumed smaller minority populations within them, thus leaving the Dinka in majority control of much of the country. Kiir's decree is part of a longer history of the use of boundary delimitations by both the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS)—particularly at the county level—as political weapons to centralize power, marginalize opponents, and legally sanction land grabs.

Under Kiir's decree, Unity state is to be divided into three. In the north and west, Abiemnom and Pariang counties are to compose a mono-ethnic Dinka political area called 'Ruweng state', with Pariang town as its capital. 'Northern Lich' state would be composed of Rubkona, Guit, Koch, and Mayom counties, with Bentiu as its state capital, and a 'Southern Lich' state would comprise Leer, Mayendit, and Panyijar counties, and have Leer as its state capital. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLM/A–IO) immediately denounced Kiir's decree as both unconstitutional and in violation of the August 2015 peace agreement, which mandated that the governor of Unity be chosen from its ranks.

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In Unity state, the reaction to the decree varied widely. In Pariang town, the news was greeted with celebratory gunfire. The Awet and Kwil Dinka of Pariang county (collectively often referred to as the Ruweng) were isolated during the current civil war, and have long felt marginalized in South Sudan's only Nuer-majority state. Tellingly, Stephen Mabek Lang—who served as deputy governor of Unity state until Kiir dismissed all the current state-level administrations on 25 December 2015, and

who nevertheless remains the most powerful Dinka politician in the state—has always had to play second fiddle to the incumbent Nuer governor. When Taban Deng Gai was governor of Unity state (2005–13), the Ruweng Dinka blamed him for appropriating their land on the border of Rubkona and incorporating it into his personal farm. Land clashes between Rubkona and Pariang continued during the current conflict; after initial hostilities with the SPLA–IO on the border with Rubkona, the Ruweng Dinka withdrew north towards safe territory close to Pariang town, abandoning their villages in the south of the county. Many Ruweng Dinka feel that having their own state would be a way to maintain their land in the face of unrest and powerful Nuer politicians elsewhere in Unity state.

The Dinka of Abiemnom and Pariang are part of the riverine Padang Dinka group, which is historically less politically powerful in South Sudan than the Dinka of Bor or Bahr el Ghazal. However, with the rise of the Padang Dinka minister of petroleum, Stephen Dieu Dhau, and the increased importance of Upper Nile’s Padang militia forces, which have been fighting Johnson Olonyi’s Agwelek forces since April 2015, the Padang Dinka have become an increasingly important force in the national political landscape. Under Kiir’s decree, both Paloich—the sole operative oil field in South Sudan—and the fields of Toor and Toma South in Pariang, would be within Padang Dinka-majority states. The creation of Ruweng state, together with the appointment of Chol Thon Balok as the governor of Eastern Nile, is reflective of the Padang Dinka’s increasing importance to Kiir’s administration.

The creation of Ruweng state threatens to spark renewed conflict over land. In January 2016, at a meeting of Nuer traditional leaders, Koang Bipal Rialthieng, a Bul Nuer community leader, claimed that the borders of Ruweng state annexed more than 20 Bul Nuer villages in Mayom county, while Leek Nuer chiefs said that the decree would place ten Nuer villages from Rubkona county within the boundaries of the newly created Dinka state. Some of these villages have long been contested. Their formal delimitation within a majority-Dinka administrative state would rekindle these conflicts. The ethnicization of state politics inherent in Kiir’s decree has the capacity to cast land disputes in absolute terms, as territory will be determined as either Nuer or Dinka, in contrast to the more flexible forms of shared land usage that characterize much of the territory in Unity state.

The situation between Rubkona and Abiemnom–Pariang is particularly marked. In order for Ruweng state to be contiguous, Rubkona’s valuable land bridge to Sudan had to be annexed to the new state, so that Abiemnom and Pariang could be connected. This makes Northern Lich state entirely dependent on Ruweng state for vital trade links to Sudan, the source of many important supplies. Furthermore, the slim connective strip between Abiemnom and Pariang also passes next to the Unity oil field to the south, and the Tor oil field to the north; the exact location of the strip’s borders is sure to be contentious, as it will affect the oil revenues of the new states.

Land issues are not the only reason Kiir’s decree has proved divisive. The Bul Nuer community has responded to the decree with some ambivalence, given the political context in the state. As the Bul Nuer fought with the government and participated in the 2015 dry-season offensive in southern Unity, many Dok, Jikany, and Leek Nuer inhabitants of the Bentiu–Rubkona protection of civilians site have expressed a sense

of betrayal by the Bul Nuer, openly calling them ‘Dinka’ and threatening to take revenge once their dominance of the state’s political administration has ceased. During the second half of 2015, Bul Nuer community leaders variously suggested that Mayom should form its own state, or that Unity should be divided into two, with Mayom joining Abiemnom, Pariang, and Rubkona counties; such a division would effectively mirror the split political loyalties of the state, with a northern pro-GRSS state, and a pro-SPLA–IO southern region. The Bul Nuer fear that being placed in a Northern Lich state with Leek and Jikany Nuer largely loyal to the SPLA–IO would be a precursor to retributory attacks, meted out against their community.

In southern Unity, Kiir’s decree is similarly unpopular. The proposed Southern Lich state would turn the poorest part of Unity state—which is also most affected by the current civil war—into a mono-ethnic Nuer area. It would also cut off the region from access to much of Unity’s oil revenue, should oil production restart.

Kiir’s decree has not met with international approval either. On 31 January 2016, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional political bloc overseeing South Sudan’s peace talks, asked the GRSS to suspend its plan to implement the 28 states, and the US Envoy to South Sudan, Donald Booth, has stated that the decree was not consistent with the peace agreement. However, despite these criticisms, Kiir has continued with his plan, appointing governors for the 28 states on 24 December 2015, before announcing on 17 January 2016 that he would not countenance revoking the creation of the 28 states.

Tensions are running high on both sides. On 18 January, Riek Machar stated he would not return to Juba until the decree was revoked; on 23 January, the Jieng Council of Elders announced that reversing the decree would lead to another war. Formally, the GRSS has accepted IGAD’s proposal to suspend implementing the 28 states. However, it has not reversed the decree. Instead, its position is that the formalization of the 28 states will be suspended until the TGoNU is established, whereupon the new government will debate the decree. However, on 2 February, Michael Makuei, the GRSS spokesperson, warned that if the TGoNU failed to agree on the 28 states, the decree would nonetheless be implemented. While the GRSS appears to have accepted the IGAD proposal, the newly appointed governors of the 28 states have also been appointing deputy governors and effectively continuing to carry out Kiir’s decree. Thus, in a dynamic familiar from GoS–GRSS negotiations, formal agreements at the political level are undercut by dynamics on the ground.

In Unity, it is unclear whether Kiir’s decree is compatible with the August peace agreement. In that agreement, the governorship of Unity is to be given to an SPLM/A–IO nominee. Makuei has repeatedly contended that the decree does not necessarily have to interfere with the peace process: if the SPLM/A–IO were to have the governorship of Unity, then it would also have the governorship of the three new states. In reality, however, this scenario may be difficult to realize. Ruweng state has steadfastly supported the SPLM/A during the current conflict, and an SPLM/A–IO-appointed governor would have no popular mandate in the territory, and very likely no power.

An SPLM/A–IO governor in Northern Lich state is even more unlikely. Currently, the most important politicians in Unity state are all Bul Nuer. The governor of Unity state, until he was dismissed—along with the governors of the other nine states—on 25 December 2015, was Joseph Nguen Monytil. The head of the SPLA’s 4th Division is now Stephen Buay, the former head of the SPLA’s 1st Division in Renk, Upper Nile; on 2 December 2015, Kiir chose him to replace Tayib Gatluak, one of two commanders—along with Matthew Puljang—widely responsible for the 2015 dry-season campaign in southern Unity. Both Buay and Gatluak are Bul Nuer. Given the Bul Nuer’s current political and military dominance of the state and the level of resentment shown against them by the rest of Unity’s Nuer population, they are not likely to accept an SPLM/A–IO appointment to the governorship of Northern Lich state. This is especially the case since a figure close to Taban Deng Gai would be likely to take power. Taban Deng, a Jikany Nuer from Guit county and the former governor of Unity state, is one of the most important figures in the SPLM/A–IO and is personally and politically detested by Nguen Monytil. The two men have struggled for power in Unity state since the second civil war, when Taban Deng became governor—with Machar’s backing—in 1997, in a contest against Nguen Monytil, the Bul Nuer candidate backed by the then powerful commander Paulino Matiep.

Kiir’s initial appointments to the governorships of the three states did not include any members of the SPLM/A–IO. In Northern Lich, Nguen Monytil was appointed governor. In this way, he effectively retained his position as governor of a newly reduced Unity state; with this move, Kiir indicated that he intended for the pro-government Bul Nuer domination of politics in Bentiu to continue. Kiir gave the governance of Southern Lich to Taker Riek, a Dok Nuer trader, who, from 2009 to 2010, had been an exceptionally unpopular commissioner of Leer county, until his dismissal by Taban Deng. During the 2015 dry-season offensive in southern Unity, Riek led attacks on multiple villages and burned down much of Leer town, except for the south, which is inhabited by his relatives. He is overwhelmingly disliked in southern Unity, where he is held responsible for population displacement, killings, and the razing of villages. His appointment as governor is effectively an announcement that the GRSS intends to perpetuate its military occupation of parts of southern Unity.

In Ruweng state, Mayol Kur Akuei, a member of parliament for Pariang, was appointed as governor. Stephen Mabek Lang, the former deputy governor of Unity state (2013–15), and commissioner of Pariang county before that, was not appointed governor, even though he has long been the most powerful figure in Pariang state. Mabek Lang was the leading SPLA commander in the region during the second civil war, and he comes from the family of one of the area’s most important spiritual leaders. He was generally unpopular as commissioner of Pariang, however; amid claims of nepotism, there were repeated calls for his removal. Not appointing Mabek Lang is a palliative move for Kiir. Mayol Kur was a more neutral figure, backed as a replacement by Mabek Lang’s opponents; meanwhile, the former deputy governor is reportedly destined for a government position in Juba.

In Ruweng county, the political structure has not significantly changed since Mayol Kur’s appointment, indicating that Mabek Lang largely retains control of the Dinka areas of Unity state. On 9 February 2016, and seemingly in contravention of Makuei’s

claim that the ‘operationalization’ of Kiir’s decree would be suspended, Mayol Kur appointed his new cabinet for the state. Some figures are familiar from Mabek Lang’s time as commissioner and deputy governor. Others, however, are newer, younger faces and, in general, the administration is inexperienced. The new Pariang commissioner, for instance, is a young schoolteacher from Pariang, Mayom Manyiel. Mawien Makuac was appointed deputy governor. Makuac is from Abiemnom, and his appointment was in part due to a need to balance power in the administration between Pariang and Abiemnom counties. Traditionally, Pariang has been the more politically important county within Unity state.

The appointments of Taker Riek and Mayol Kur illustrate a more general trend in Kiir’s choices for the governorships of 28 states. Rather than the most powerful political figures in each region, Kiir has tended to appoint weaker figures. In the newly created region of Western Nile, the Shilluk heartland, Kiir appointed William Othon as governor. Othon, a respected lawyer in Juba, has no popular legitimacy on the west bank of the Nile, and has, for the last ten years, almost entirely lived in Juba, where he worked for the GRSS. Such appointments have two positive effects for Kiir. First, if he is forced to give governorships in Unity and Upper Nile to the SPLM/A–IO, he can remove these governors with a minimum of disturbance. Second, the governors’ weakness is Juba’s strength: unable to build personal powerbases in regions where they have little support, the new governors are dependent on Juba for power, and thus more likely to acquiesce to Kiir’s instructions.

The continuing campaign in the South

The ratification of the peace agreement on 10 September 2015 by the South Sudanese parliament did little to change the GRSS’s conduct in the war in southern Unity, even though a ceasefire was supposedly in effect. That month, SPLA forces used barges and gunboats to attack villages near Adok and Tayer. Throughout October, the SPLA and the SPLA–IO clashed in Leer county, while government-aligned forces continued to attack civilians in Mayendit county, pushing thousands of people south, into Panyijar, which remains largely under the control of the SPLA–IO. The SPLA–IO also launched raids in Guit and Rubkona counties during this period. Thus, from September to October 2015, a familiar rainy season pattern of intermittent clashes held sway, with the rains, as much as any peace agreement, being responsible for the diminished levels of violence. The general logic of the conflict was one in which SPLA–IO forces attacked SPLA positions around Bentiu, in Rubkona and Koch, while the SPLA continued to raid and harass civilian populations of southern Unity.

Although clashes continued in late November—notably at Nhialdiu on 18 November—the situation was sufficiently improved that the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) could establish a forward operating base in Leer, and aid agencies could recommence work in the region.

In December 2015 through mid-February 2016, the military situation in Unity was largely quiet. There was intra-ethnic fighting in Panyijar (18–20 December), although it was not between the SPLA and the SPLA–IO. Both sides have been maneuvering, however, and are prepared to fight again. While the SPLA remains militarily dominant in the state, the SPLA–IO still has forces close to Bentiu, and the GRSS knows that it can only hold southern Unity under conditions of military occupation.



In many respects, the operative tensions in Unity state are no longer simply between the SPLA and the SPLA–IO. The SPLA’s successful dry-season campaign in 2015 saw the SPLA–IO’s main military base at Panakuach destroyed, and the opposition largely defeated as a military force in the state. Its remaining troops in the state can do no more than wage a war of harassment and intermittent clashes. However, Kiir’s decree threatens to ignite inter- and intra-ethnic tensions whose dynamics will be focused on revenge for the 2015 dry-season campaign and land disputes triggered by Kiir’s administrative decree. These conflicts will be largely delinked from political negotiations in Juba, signaling a further breakdown of South Sudan’s civil war into a series of local conflicts.