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ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Violence in South Sudan

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Front cover photo

A woman walks through the Renk Transit Center in Upper Nile state, South Sudan, near the Sudan border, February 2025.
Source: Diego Menjíbar Reynés

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Overview

This Briefing Paper examines what led South Sudan to delay elections scheduled for December 2024 and considers likely developments in the new two-year transitional period. It focuses on the place of the Tumaini Peace Initiative in South Sudan's political compact, the effects of the war in Sudan on politics in Juba, and the violence scarring the country. The paper finds that South Sudanese President Salva Kiir's decision to delay elections was not due to straitened economic circumstances, but was rather an attempt to keep together a fraying elite compact. Political dynamics in Juba also led to the collapse of the Tumaini talks. Kiir's chosen successor, Benjamin Bol Mel, may not have the political capital to take over South Sudan. This paper concludes by analysing the lineaments of the civil war that would likely ensue if Kiir's succession plan fails.

Key findings

- The Tumaini talks are an attempt to integrate hold-out groups and dissident politicians into Kiir's political compact. The talks were undermined by politicians who risked losing their positions within that coalition.
- Thus far, Kiir has walked a tightrope over the war in Sudan. He retains a close relationship with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Several members of his coalition have also forged business ties with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).
- South Sudan is in the grip of a lasting economic crisis. In 2024, the country's main oil pipeline went offline and inflation soared to 600%.
- Plans for a post-Kiir South Sudan are being plotted by his supporters and rivals. Among those jockeying for power, there is no one able to command the assent of the country's elite; civil war is a very real possibility following the end of Kiir's reign.

Introduction

In September 2024, after Kiir announced a further two-year extension of the transitional process, he began clearing house. The rapid turnover of government personnel increased. Simon Juach Deng and Atak Santino Majak from the Office of the President were replaced, among many others. In the past Kiir had expertly used appointments and dismissals to marginalize threats to his rule by setting his rivals against each other.[1] In the second half of 2024, however, some politicians whispered that the decisions were coming too fast, without rhyme or reason.[2] Rumours abounded that Kiir was increasingly paranoid, or, some said, seriously ill.[3]

By October 2024, the situation seemed ripe for revolt. Most government salaries had not been paid since November 2023. Even their payment made little difference to those living in Juba—inflation in 2024 soared to 600% Discontent was growing among unpaid members of the security services and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF).[4] Chatter among the country's elite was no longer about elections but about what the government would look like after Kiir's presidency ended.

Kiir made the situation all the more combustible with a series of provocative decisions. On 2 October, he removed Akol Koor Kuc, the head of the Internal Security Bureau (ISB) of the National Security Service (NSS), amid rumours he was plotting a coup. Initially, Kiir seemed to be trying to appease his rival by appointing him the governor of Warrap state, but after Akol Koor returned to Juba from Dubai on 9 October his gubernatorial appointment was abruptly revoked.[5] Rumours also swirled that Kiir had removed Lual Wek Gem, also known as Lual Maroldit, from his position as the Commander of Tiger Division (Radio Tamazuj, 2024b).[6] Kiir had sacked important commanders and politicians before, but never figures so central to his security apparatus.

On 21 November, tensions erupted into open gunfire in Juba, after an attempt by the security services to relocate Akol Koor from his residence in Tongpiny was resisted by his bodyguards.[7] Following an intervention on 23 November by Santino Deng Wol, at that time the chief of defence forces for the SSPDF, Akol Koor consented to be moved to Jebel, where he reportedly gave up his mobile phones—part of an effort to cut contact between the former spy chief and forces loyal to him (Sudans Post, 2024).[8] Uncertainty then surrounded the fate of Stephen Marshall Babanen, the Murle chief of military

intelligence, who is a sworn enemy of Akol Koor.[9] On 26 November, South Sudanese traders fled markets in Juba amid rumours—denied by the SSPDF—that Babanen had been dismissed. At the end of November, many feared South Sudan was about to explode. Yet the bomb never went off (see Map 1 for information on armed groups' control and activity as of December 2024).

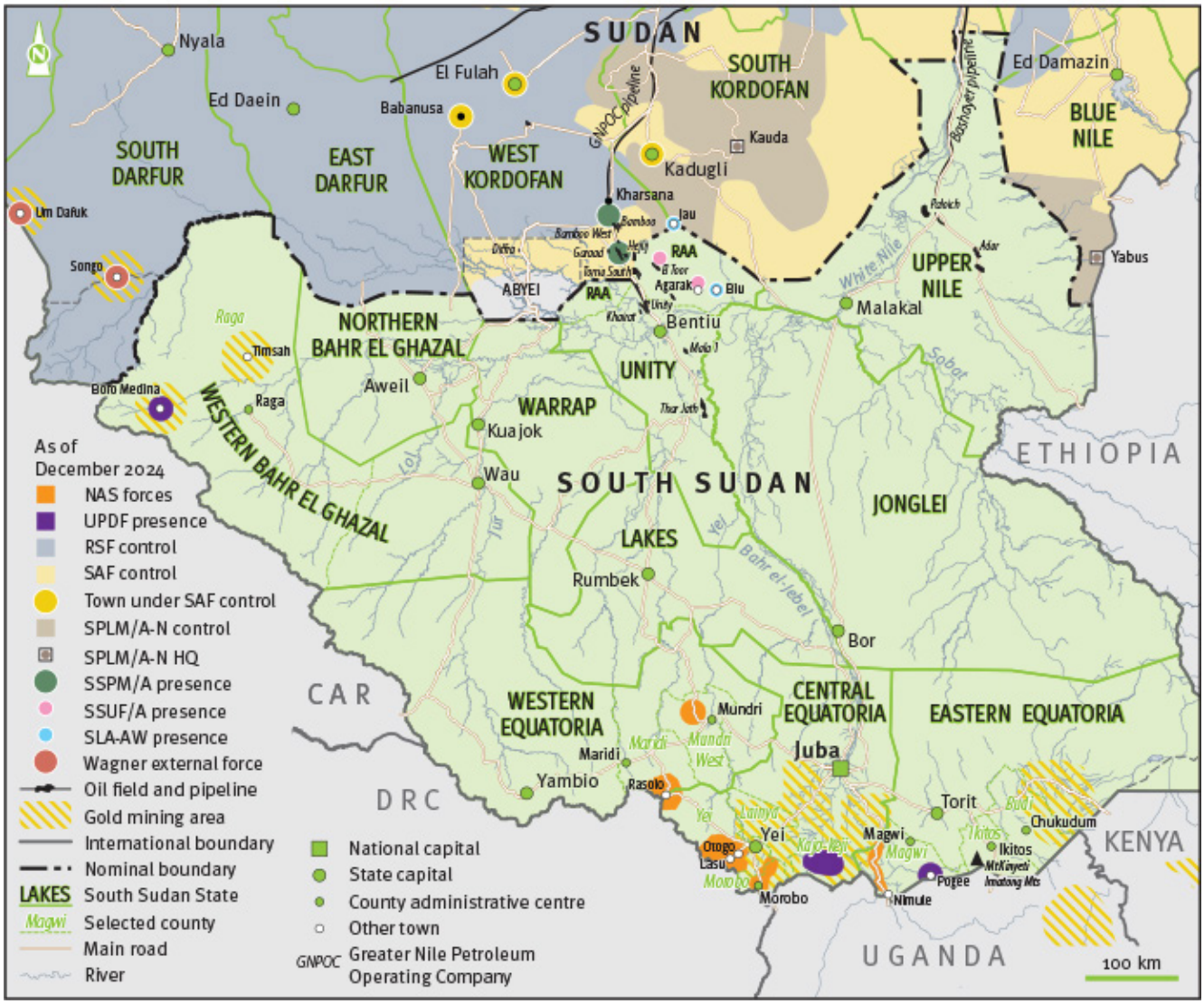
In 2005, a strong Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and a diverse set of security actors could act as a check on Kiir's power. Since the fracturing of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), there has been no viable alternative to the system of patronage constructed around Kiir. The system created by Kiir's mode of rule, as this Briefing Paper will show, prevented the electoral process and blocked the Tumaini Peace Initiative. Its true cost will only be felt when Kiir is gone.[10]

A productive non-election

In 2018, South Sudan's civil war (2013–18) ended with the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). That agreement created a transitional government and stipulated that elections would be held in 2022. Over the next four years, little was done to implement the agreement, and in February 2022 the government delayed elections until December 2024. On 13 September 2024, the South Sudanese government once again delayed elections, extending the transitional period for a further two years. In some senses, this was 2022, redux. From 2018 to 2024, implementation of the peace agreement proceeded at a glacial pace. By the time the second extension was announced, more than six years after the signing of the R-ARCSS, the South Sudanese constitution had still not been drafted, a census had yet to be undertaken, and security sector reform (SSR) arrangements, which were supposed to create a unified army, had still not been finalized. All these delays exasperated the international community. For the Troika, elections were the *sine qua non* of the peace agreement, and the further extension was bewailed as a collective failure of South Sudan's leadership (Troika, 2024).[11] The government blamed the delay on South Sudan's ailing economy, with the minister of cabinet affairs Martin Elia Lomuro citing a lack of funds as the primary reason for not having held elections as planned (Radio Tamazuj, 2024a).[12]

Neither the Troika's nor Lomuro's position is particularly edifying. One presumes a lack of government will; the other presumes that the government is willing, but lacks the resources to hold elections. What these positions occlude is that the South Sudanese government has considerable political will, along

Map 1 Areas of armed groups' control and activity



Notes: CAR = Central African Republic; DRC = Democratic Republic of the Congo; RAA = Ruweng Administrative Area; SSUF/A = South Sudan United Front Army; SLA-AW = Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid.

with the material capacity to actualize many of the projects it finds important. Delays in the implementation of the R-ARCSS are *political* choices. Initially, the ponderous formation of a transitional government—which took two years, rather than the eight months set out for this process in the R-ARCSS—enabled Kiir to forge a coalition of relatively weak candidates, dependent on his largesse. Kiir's regime effectively functioned as a centralized dictatorship, with positions distributed in Juba following the prescriptions of the R-ARCSS—according to a calculus worked out among the elite, rather than on the basis of local legitimacy (Craze and Markó, 2022). Though the SPLM/A-IO was formally allocated positions under the terms of the R-ARCSS, substantively its representatives were isolated from government funding and real power, and dependent on Kiir's regime—the same was true of the other parties to the agreement.

Extending the transition period in 2022 proved productive for Kiir, as it allowed him to use the very terms of the peace agreement to further consolidate his grip on power, continuing the project of the civil war, albeit by different means. Stalled implementation of SSR, for instance, allowed the government to humiliate SPLA-IO forces expecting salaries and weapons under the terms of the R-ARCSS, and precipitated wholesale defections from the opposition (Craze, 2020). These defections weakened Riek Machar, the leader of the SPLM/A-IO, and allowed Kiir to assert control over South Sudan by setting opposition forces against each other and making them dependent on his favour (Craze, 2024b).

By the middle of the first extension period, elections had begun to seem like an attractive prospect for Kiir. Central to this changed evaluation of the electoral process was the growing weakness of the SPLM/A-IO. Kiir had peeled off much of the opposition group's military strength through defections and brutal military campaigns, often waged via proxies (Craze, 2022a; OHCHR, 2022). Machar's support, particularly among the Eastern Nuer, had plummeted as his weakness at the national level was revealed.[13] Blocked from sources of funding and fearful of rivals, Machar appointed a narrow circle of loyalists to the government positions allocated to the SPLM-IO, alienating much of the Nuer political class, who jumped ship and joined the government.[14]

Opposition weakness extended to South Sudan's other political parties. Many groupings, including the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), were opportunistic assemblages, created to gain access to posts within the transitional government.[15] None of these parties have any real organizational basis in South Sudan.[16] While they had allowed Kiir to maximize his allocation of government positions, they were dispensable. Having weakened the opposition during the first five years of the transitional period, Kiir prepared to vanquish them at the ballot box.

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Much of South Sudan also eagerly anticipated elections (PeaceRep, 2024). During the extended transitional period, elections became the sociological fact around which South Sudan's political life was organized. At the state level, Potemkin figures installed via the R-ARCSS began jockeying to try and ensure they would receive SPLM nominations for state-level positions, in the hope that the party's favour would enable them to overcome their lack of local legitimacy.[17] Ethnic communities across the country engaged in elaborate electoral calculations over who would be permitted to stand for positions. Kiir began preparing for elections by holding rallies across much of the country, as the SPLM party machinery in all three regions of South Sudan nominated him for president (Small Arms Survey, 2023d). The always-frenetic turnover of state and national positions also shifted to reflect an electoral calculus. Weak political figures useful for blocking powerful local politicians were replaced by populist figures capable of winning elections (Small Arms Survey, 2023b; 2023d). Kiir also re-emphasized his place in the SPLM/A's long struggle against the Sudanese government in Khartoum, rhetorically appealing to a time of relative unity.[18] This appeal was designed to assuage widespread discontent within South Sudan, which reflected both the country's direction and the presence, within Kiir's coterie of advisers, of figures closely connected to the former Sudanese dictator, Omar al-Bashir (Small Arms Survey, 2023c; 2024a). Despite such discontent, there were no other viable candidates for the presidency—precisely thanks to Kiir's strategies of divide and rule—and the SPLM was the overwhelming favourite to win almost all the national and gubernatorial elections scheduled for 2024.

In spite of overwhelming popular support for elections in South Sudan, there were formidable obstacles, both practical and political. Practically, conducting a census and demarcating constituency boundaries in a country beset by flooding and riven with conflict would have been extremely difficult to carry out. Both processes would also have been politically explosive. Since 2005, the South Sudanese regime has encouraged ethnic groups to think of administrative units—such as counties, payams, and bomas—as communitarian possessions. Interethnic relations have frayed as groups have come to understand themselves as mini-states in zero-sum competitions with their neighbours (Craze, 2013; 2014; 2019). Conflict has often followed from interethnic competition over county- and state-level positions that are treated as sinecures, and used to funnel scarce resources to one community at the expense of another (Small Arms Survey, 2024b).[19] The process of state-creation in South Sudan, from 2005 to 2024, led to national fragmentation. In this context, any attempt to conduct a census would be a fraught endeavour given that such determinations of population size would be used for many forms of resource

allocation, including the disbursement of humanitarian resources.[20] Determining and demarcating constituency boundaries would also be difficult. In both Warrap (Craze, 2022b; Pendle, 2014) and Upper Nile states (Craze, 2019; Pritchard, 2020), for instance, borders imposed by top-down, state-driven processes have created intergroup conflict. These structural political problems, almost impossible to address, could have been resolved by simply ignoring them. Senior members of the SPLM stated that an election without a permanent constitution or a census would have been possible (UNSC, 2024a, p. 8). While such an election would not have met international standards of best practice, it would, nonetheless, have been an election.

The more determinant obstacle to elections lay not in the practical problems posed by the process but rather in the system that had ensured Kiir's rule since 2018. Many members of the transitional government were well aware that they risked losing all their privileges if an election were to take place. No one stood to lose more than Machar. The SPLM/A-IO was initially a Nuer force, which gave form to the widespread community anger that had ensued after the Juba massacres of December 2013 (AUCISS, 2014). It was initially almost entirely led by Nuer commanders who had previously served with the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF) of Paulino Matiep (Young, 2006; 2015; 2016). By 2022, most of these commanders had left the SPLM/A-IO, dissatisfied with Machar's leadership, while many of the rank-and-file of the SPLM/A-IO felt that the leadership of the organization had betrayed its communitarian roots. Machar would continue to lose both commanders and popularity over the next two years, including—humiliatingly—the defection of Simon Maguek Gai in Leer town in October 2023.[21] To the extent that it had managed to build a party outside Nuer territory, by 2022, the SPLM-IO was largely composed of politicians who had opportunistically used their membership to gain access to political power. For instance, diaspora politicians in Warrap without a hope of obtaining a place within the SPLM returned to the state in 2020–22 to take advantage of positions proffered by the SPLM-IO, in the full knowledge that their sinecures depended on the continuation of transitional arrangements (Craze, 2022b, pp. 29–30).[22]

The SPLM-IO was keenly aware that it would have overwhelmingly lost the elections postulated for December 2024, especially as the SPLM was holding the country's purse strings and preventing opposition groups from holding rallies or building up a base of support (UNHRC, 2023, pp. 23–24). Machar's official position was to call for the full implementation of the peace agreement, including the long-delayed creation of a national army, but such a position masked his desire to avoid elections *in toto*. Other opposition groups had similar qualms: the SSOA and the Other Political Parties (OPP) had no ground operations that would have allowed them to contest elections, and would have lost the positions guaranteed to them by the R-ARCSS.

Even more substantively, it was parts of Kiir's coalition that resisted elections. Like the SSOA and the OPP, many SPLM politicians lacked local legitimacy, and feared that elections would spell the end of their time in power. Explicitly coming out against the elections, however, was not politically possible: they were the horizon against which South Sudanese politics was being organized. Instead, under the cover of delays, the electoral process was left to atrophy. While key pieces of legislation were signed into law—such as the National Elections Act and the Political Parties Act—the formation of these reconstituted electoral bodies proceeded at a snail's pace and they were given no money to carry out their responsibilities. Their staff remained unpaid and it was almost impossible for opposition groups to register themselves as political parties.[23]

This left Kiir in a contradictory position. He would have personally benefited from elections; however, while the system created by the R-ARCSS had enabled him to fragment the political class, and so dominate it, this had left individual politicians dependent on his largesse and the positions allocated to them under the terms of the peace agreement. This meant Kiir was surrounded by five vice presidents and any number of politicians invested in maintaining the system enabled by the R-ARCSS. Although Kiir ultimately determines the fate of these figures, he does so within a system in which he must constantly balance rivalrous politicians, and in which he is ultimately dependent on his coalition in order to rule. Rather than come out against the elections, this coalition killed the electoral process by allowing it to sink into a morass of delays and a lack of funding. Delays were once again politically expedient—if not for Kiir, then for the political elite on which his rule depends. By the end of 2023, it was increasingly apparent that the elections scheduled for December 2024 would not occur, and Kiir began looking for an escape route.

The Tumaini Peace Initiative

One of the only ways to justify an extension acceptable to the international community would have been to integrate the hold-out groups and dissident politicians that had not signed the R-ARCSS into the Revitalized Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU).[24] The hold-out groups would then have needed to disarm and form political parties before elections could be held. Several of these hold-out groups, including the National Salvation Front (NAS) of Thomas Cirillo, Pagan Amum's Real-SPLM, and Paul Malong Awan's South Sudan United Front, had been involved in intermittent talks with the South Sudanese government, held in Rome under the auspices of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic lay association. Kiir's regime used these talks as an opportunity to try to split the opposition by opening up separate negotiating channels with individual rebels—most notably with Malong. The government withdrew from the Rome talks in March 2023, in theory due to a disagreement over the agenda.

In December 2023, the South Sudanese government surprised Sant'Egidio by asking the Kenyan president, William Ruto, to host talks with the hold-out groups. For Ruto, holding the talks in Nairobi was part of a broader effort to position Kenya as the region's diplomatic epicentre, and consolidate links between Kenya and South Sudan. For Kiir, moving the talks to Nairobi allowed him to sideline Cirillo, who was not willing to come to the Kenyan capital, whence the NSS had abducted dissidents as recently as 2023 (Amnesty International, 2023). Kiir hoped that sidelining Cirillo would lead to the hold-out groups abandoning demands to fundamentally change the structure of his regime, while allowing him to absorb some rebel leaders—notably Amum, Stephen Buay Rolnyang (Buay), and Malong—into government.

Several months of shuttle diplomacy ensued between Nairobi and Juba. Ruto assigned the retired general Lazaro Sumbeiywo to oversee the initiative: Sumbeiywo had previously served as Kenya's special envoy (1997–98) to Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)-led talks designed to end the second Sudanese civil war, before becoming a mediator in the negotiations that led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. He thus carried symbolic weight, and knew many of the participants in what was christened the Tumaini Peace Initiative, after the Swahili word for hope. The initiative launched on 9 May 2024, with Ruto pressuring Kiir to attend.

The Tumaini talks were more inclusive than the Rome initiative. As expected, NAS did not participate, citing security concerns.[25] The other members of the Cirillo-led faction of the South Sudan Opposition Movement's Alliance (SSOMA), including the South Sudan Movement for Change of Alex Yata and the National Democratic Movement-Patriotic Front led by Emmanuel Ajawin, also refused to join the talks. The other faction of the SSOMA, however, which included Amum and Malong, did choose to participate. It was joined by another rebel grouping, the South Sudan United National Alliance (SSUNA), which had not participated in the Rome talks. The SSUNA was a vehicle for the ambitions of Buay, a former SPLA commander from Mayom county, who rebelled in 2021 after clashing with other members of the Bul Nuer political elite.[26] He leads the South Sudan People's Movement (SSPM). The SSUNA is composed of the SSPM and a number of minor rebel factions. These lesser factions do not have any substantive forces on the ground; they were incorporated into the SSUNA so as to give Buay more seats at the table. The SSOMA and the SSUNA were joined at the talks by civil society participants. Like the minor rebel factions, these groups had little political weight.

Kiir's primary focus was rather on the absorption of Amum, Buay, and Malong into the political compact in Juba. From the beginning, the minor rebel movements inside the SSUNA and the SSOMA complained about the dominance of the leading commanders. One group within the SSUNA, the United Democratic Revolutionary Movement (UDRM), withdrew from the coalition in June, complaining of Nuer pre-eminence.[27] Another group, the Upper Nile People's Liberation Front, led by the veteran Shilluk commander Henry Oyai Ayago, had deputized Peter Chuol Gatluak to represent it, only for Gatluak to rebel in Nairobi and form his own one-man movement, the Nilotic People's Movement, which demanded autonomy for the Upper Nile region.[28] Gatluak soon lost his place within the SSUNA—and at the negotiating table.

Noticeable by his absence was Simon Gatwich Dual, the head of the SPLM/A-IO Kitgwang faction. Since Kitgwang had ruptured internally (Craze, 2022a, pp. 38–46), Gatwich, a venerable Lou Nuer commander, had been in Sudan—initially in Khartoum and then, after the outbreak of the civil war, in Rabak, White Nile state. Gatwich had wanted to participate in Tumaini, but his way was blocked by SAF, which would not give up a prize asset to Kenya, given its proximity to the RSF.[29] Until November 2024, Gatwich remained trapped in Rabak.[30] In Gatwich's place, the talks included the Patriotic Resistance Movement, a minor splinter faction of the SPLA-IO-Kitgwang. Also included was a NAS splinter group composed of retired police officers with no forces on the ground. The message from the South Sudanese government was clear: either participate in the talks, or an ersatz version of your group will be conjured up to sign the agreement.

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From the beginning, the Tumaini talks were marked by a chasm between the government's intentions and the hold-out groups' demands. The opposition believed that the government was getting weaker: it knew that the elections scheduled for December 2024 were unlikely to occur and that, after the country's main oil pipeline had shut down in February, the country's dire economic situation had tipped into catastrophe. 'Since we arrived,' one high-ranking member of an opposition group told the author, 'we are all looking around and working out our price. Since February, I think mine has gone up.'[31] The hold-out groups were emboldened to make sweeping demands. Initially, they asked for the constitutional process to be moved from Juba to Nairobi. On 7 June the SSOMA also proposed, inter alia, that the NSS be replaced by a purely intelligence-gathering body without military capacity, and that Kiir commit to not standing for office in elections, which the proposal stated should be held in three years' time. All these measures were non-starters for the government.

Kiir's regime did not want the Tumaini talks to change the structure of power created by the R-ARCSS, but rather intended to change the personnel within that structure by absorbing opposition politicians into it. Since 2005, Kiir has ruled by a frenetic cycling through of potential rivals, building up politicians through appointments and gifts before displacing them in favour of their adversaries. Some politicians have gone through more than one cycle. Kiir's principal goal at the Tumaini talks was to cut a deal with his erstwhile enemy, Malong, his former chief of staff, who may once have investigated the possibility of overthrowing him (Boswell, 2019).

Malong's return to Juba would have enabled two political shifts. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal state, Malong's exit in 2017 had led Kiir to empower a clique of politicians formerly close to Bashir's regime in the north (Small Arms Survey, 2024a). These figures—including the then-governor of the state, Tong Akeen; the national minister of investment, Dhieu Mathok Diing; and the then-SSOA vice president, Hussein Abdel Bagi—lacked popular legitimacy in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, where they were seen as impositions from Juba.[32] Abdel Bagi, whose father had run a militia that had raped and pillaged its way through the state at Khartoum's behest, was particularly hated (Rift Valley Institute, 2020). Malong's return would have allowed the reconstitution of popular SPLM authority in the state.

Even more importantly, the return of Malong would have been a blow to his implacable enemy, Akol Koor. Malong blamed Akol Koor for orchestrating his ousting and saw the spymaster as the principal obstacle to his return. Kiir was also concerned about Akol Koor, who he suspected of plotting to take power. Akol Koor and his associates were also opposed to Kiir fast-tracking Bol Mel through the machinery of government, and appointing the Northern Bahr el

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Ghazal native as his successor. This was not the first time Kiir had been concerned about Akol Koor. He had previously tried to limit Akol Koor’s power in 2020 by dismissing him from his informal position on the Nilepet board and promoting Nhial Deng Nhial to the position of minister of presidential affairs, in order to create a counterweight to Akol Koor’s powerbase in his home state of Warrap.[33] He also instructed Bol Akot Bol, a Renk Dinka general, to use a disarmament campaign in Tonj East county as a facade to go after fighters supported by Akol Koor (Craze, 2022b, pp. 32–38), while simultaneously building up SSPDF Military Intelligence under Rin Tueny Mabor Deng as a counterweight to the NSS. The disarmament campaign failed. Powerbrokers in the SPLM, including Kuol Manyang, began to positioned Nhial as a replacement for Kiir; Nhial was then removed, and Akol Koor restored. After his restoration, Akol Koor’s power grew, especially in Warrap: he was responsible for the 2022 dismissal of Aleu Anyieny Aleu as the state governor and his replacement with Manheim Bol Malek (Craze, 2023d).[34] In May 2024, the return of Malong was considered as a means of blocking Akol Koor’s power.

The other figures that Kiir wished to bring into government would also have allowed him to marginalize enemies in Juba. While Amum, the Shilluk politician, no longer has a popular constituency in Upper Nile, he remains a potent figure within the SPLM, and is a potential counterweight to the minister of cabinet affairs, Lomuro (Craze, 2019, p. 30), as well as a viable secretary general for the SPLM. Amum, who had always been one of the ‘Garangists’ most loyal to John Garang’s vision of a New Sudan, and implacably opposed to the regime in Khartoum, would also serve as a check on the former members of Bashir’s National Congress Party (NCP), such as Tut Kew Gatluak, who, in May 2023, still played an important role in Kiir’s regime.[35] Tut Kew had a fractious but effective alliance with the then-governor of Unity state, Nguen Monytuil, who was a former member of Matiep’s SSDF, backed by Khartoum (Craze and Tubiana, 2016; Small Arms Survey, 2023c), until Nguen’s dismissal in May 2024. Buay, who had always remained within the SPLA, and had not rebelled until 2021, is a popular Bul Nuer commander with political ambitions. He would have enabled Kiir to limit the power of the Bul Nuer power bloc that surrounded Tut Kew and Nguen.[36] The alignment of this bloc with the government during the South Sudanese civil war had enabled it to maintain control of Unity state (Craze and Tubiana, 2016). During the transitional period, this same bloc had entrenched Kiir’s connection to Khartoum. With elections anticipated, however, figures such as Tut Kew had become increasingly unpopular, and a shift within the ruling coalition to legacy SPLM/A figures, who fought during the second civil war, would likely have been positively received, especially among the SPLM/A old guard of Jonglei and Warrap states.

These projected pivots were part of a changing strategy for Kiir’s regime. During the initial transitional period, Kiir had focused on splitting the opposition by creating divisions in rebel groups and setting politicians against each other. The opposition, without the sort of external supplies—in terms of money and materiel—that could attract popular support, found itself unable to constitute a viable alternative order. Historically, opposition forces in southern Sudan have needed external sponsorship: the SPLM/A relied on Ethiopian and Soviet support in the 1980s, while the SSDF had backing from Khartoum. The regional realignment expressed by the R-ARCSS, which was overseen by both Kampala and Khartoum, meant opposition forces could not find support outside South Sudan’s borders. As Kiir no longer had to worry about Sudan’s backing of South Sudanese rebels, he could instead outsource conflict inside the country to those very rebel groups: witness his use of Shilluk commander Johnson Olonyi’s forces, the Agwelek, to fight both the SPLA-IO and Gatwich’s Kitgwang in Upper Nile (Small Arms Survey, 2023a).

By mid-2023, the geopolitical situation had changed. The war in Sudan meant there was the possibility of one or the other side supporting rebel groups inside South Sudan; Buay’s forces had fought for the RSF, as had small numbers of Malong’s forces.[37] Furthermore, in order to have elections, Kiir needed at least the appearance of stability within South Sudan: too much open conflict would have made the electoral process impossible. Commanders such as Olonyi, and minor renegade generals such as Dickson Gatluak, were effectively bought off and then warehoused in Juba, under house arrest—their political and military powers neutralized (Craze, 2024a).[38]

At the beginning of 2024, Kiir hoped his absorption of the opposition would soon include the participants of the Tumaini Peace Initiative. Kiir’s strategy, however, was not well received by Amum, Buay, and Malong. The hold-out groups looked dimly on the prospect of returning to Juba, only to find themselves remote from real power, given meaningless sinecures and effectively kept under house arrest—the fate of both Machar and Olonyi. Despite their potential usefulness to Kiir, this fate could not be ruled out, and was far from the radical reform of R-ARCSS that the hold-out groups had envisaged.

Kiir’s plan also faced opposition in Juba. The integration of the participants in the Tumaini talks into the government threatened the political compact created by the R-ARCSS, just as the prospect of elections had done. This opposition was intensified by the actions of the participants in the talks: the hold-out groups and the Kenyan mediation stretched the negotiations to encompass a far more radical agenda than that envisaged in Juba. The opposition even proposed subsuming the R-ARCSS into the Tumaini Peace Initiative. Its position was that, given that the transitional process had not borne fruit in Juba, matters such as

the constitution should be worked out in Nairobi. By 15 July, the two sides had made some hesitant progress, but all the major issues remained unresolved.

The SPLM/A-IO was resistant to the Tumaini talks, because it feared a dilution of its own representation in the R-TGoNU. Machar's fears were not misplaced—for Kiir, such dilution would have been one of the talks' beneficial consequences. On 16 July, the SPLM/A-IO withdrew, claiming that the Tumaini Peace Initiative was undermining the R-ARCSS. Machar was not the only one in Juba to feel threatened by the Tumaini talks. Many of Kiir's coterie of close advisers also worried that they would lose their places to politicians from the hold-out groups. Lomuro feared Amum's return, while Tut Kew Gatluak was opposed to Buay's integration: not only would Buay pose a threat to Tut Kew's status within the Bul Nuer community, but the two men have personal enmity—Buay's troops killed Tut Kew's brother, then the commissioner in Mayom, in 2022. Tut Kew took revenge by having one of Buay's officers burned alive.

Resistance in Juba led the Tumaini initiative to stall. The government cancelled a scheduled meeting between some of the hold-out groups and Kiir in Pretoria, South Africa, at the beginning of August 2024. By mid-August, the R-TGoNU signed a measure agreeing that the Tumaini initiative would complement, rather than replace, the R-ARCSS, nullifying the grander visions of the hold-out groups. In theory, a final agreement was to have been signed in Nairobi between the participants in the Tumaini Peace Initiative on 16 September. Resistance to the talks in Juba, however, was such that the signing of the agreement was torpedoed by the unilateral announcement on 13 September of an extension to the transitional period: the opprobrium of the international community proved less worrying to Kiir than the fracture within his coalition that the Tumaini agreement would have provoked.

With the signing of the extension, the Tumaini talks were plunged into uncertainty. Kiir launched the Tumaini initiative with goals that, by December 2024, had been achieved by other means. The removal of Akol Koor in October 2024 had been accomplished without Malong's return. Akol Koor and Maroldit had been replaced by veteran SPLA commanders, chosen so as to split the two men's home constituencies, rendering them less able to form opposition blocs.[39] In the months following Akol Koor's dismissal, Kiir ordered Akec Tong Aleu to remove the former director general's relatives and supporters from the NSS. Tut Kew was also removed from his position as presidential security adviser in January 2025, and first appointed the envoy to the Middle East, before being demoted to the ambassador of Kuwait in February 2025. Tut Kew's demotion was the final act in the removal of Akol Koor's supporters within the government.[40]

With the dismissal of Nguen Monytuil and Tut Kew, Kiir had also removed the Bul Nuer elite that had been in control of Unity state. In their place, Kiir promoted Riek Biem Tap (Riek Biem)—now governor of Unity state—along with Joseph Manuat, a former SSDF commander, and Tito Biel Wek, a former SPLA-IO commander as well as a former member of the SSDF, to constitute a new Bul Nuer elite in Unity state, which had no need for Buay, who spent September–December 2024 competing with Manuat and Biel Wek to recruit forces in Mayom county.[41] In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Tong Akeen was dismissed in May 2024, and Hussein Abdel Bagi in February 2025. Many of the figures close to them in national government were also moved on. Without Akol Koor in need of negation or the former NCP forces in control of Northern Bahr el Ghazal, it became unclear what role Malong might play in Kiir's rejigged SPLM.

Meanwhile, resistance to the Tumaini talks in Juba remained strong. Having committed to the talks, however, it is unlikely that Kiir's regime will want them to fail, if for no other reason than Ruto's investment in the Tumaini process means the Kenyan leader is desperate for an outcome he can call a success. To resolve this contradiction, Kiir tried to limit the scope of the talks and overcome opposition in Juba. At the beginning of November 2024, Kiir sacked the government's special envoy to Tumaini, Albino Mathom Ayuel. A week later, he formed a new R-TGoNU delegation to Nairobi, which once again included the SPLM-IO. The new delegation was composed of many of the politicians—including Lomuro—originally hostile to the talks. Kiir's gambit was that, by appointing those originally hostile to Tumaini to conduct the negotiations, he could push them into owning the process.

Against this backdrop, the opposition has seen its political value decrease; it is no longer clear that the government needs the hold-out groups to come to Juba. In response to government attempts to negotiate separate deals with each of the main participants in the talks, in January 2025 the opposition formed a new movement, the United People's Alliance (UPA), led by Amum, with Malong and Mario Laku as deputies, and Malong's assistant, Lual Dau, as secretary general. Negotiations between Kiir's regime and the UPA resumed in January, but were unable to overcome substantive differences over the status of the talks. On 9 February 2025, the talks were adjourned, with no date set for them to resume. While the return of Amum and Malong might still be part of a future government strategy, dependent on an unfolding situation in Juba, by the end of January 2025 opposition politicians considered the talks dead.[42]

Walking the tightrope

The Sudanese civil war that began on 15 April 2023 has been both devastating and profitable for South Sudan. The devastation is easier to grasp. Over a million people have fled the conflict in Sudan and entered South Sudan, a country of approximately 12 million people that is already struggling with extensive flooding affecting 1.4 million people and a protracted economic crisis (OCHA, 2024). In addition, two million people remain internally displaced (IOM, 2024). According to the World Food Programme, nine million people, 74% of the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance as of October 2024 (WFP, 2024). The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) evaluation for South Sudan classified 6.3 million people as being in IPC Phase 3 (crisis) or above as of November 2024—those in Phase 5 (catastrophe) include 31,000 'returnees' from Sudan (IPC, 2024). Returnees—the word often used for South Sudanese fleeing the conflict in the north—is an inadequate formulation: many of the people leaving Sudan have not lived in southern Sudan for decades and, even for those who have been domiciled in South Sudan more recently, many areas are uninhabitable due to flooding or conflict. Such unsettlement is an opportunity for enrichment and political power. Displaced peoples have been funnelled to sites that allow politicians to make claims to contested territory (Small Arms Survey, 2023c). The location of these sites is itself a locus for political struggles between politicians, for the displaced are a useful resource to be cultivated: local administrations receive a cut—putatively for the host community—from the humanitarian aid given out to support refugees (Craze, 2023e).

The economic consequences of the war in Sudan have also been both devastating and profitable for South Sudan. The devastation is once again clearer.

Border communities reliant on trade with the north have seen the flow of essential goods reduced to a trickle (Majok, 2024; REACH, 2024), increasing their dependence on flows of Ugandan commodities from a remote Juba. For the elite in the capital, inured to these scarcities, the most damaging consequence of the war thus far was the February 2024 rupture of the pipeline that carried South Sudan's heavy Dar Blend crude oil north to Port Sudan, reducing South Sudan's exports from 150,000 barrels per day to just 45,000 (UNSC, 2024b).[43] The remaining pipeline carries Nile Blend and runs from Unity state through to Khartoum, where it meets and runs alongside the first pipeline, all the way to Port Sudan; oil from the Unity pipeline is usually allocated to Bol Mel's companies, as part of the oil-for-roads programme, which is intended to get oil revenues off the book and into the pockets of selected members of the elite surrounding Kiir as quickly as possible (Craze, 2023a; UNSC, 2023). The shut-off of the Dar Blend pipeline has meant that the government is largely denuded of funds. The 2024–25 budget is only half funded. A third of that budget is dedicated to salaries, with around 70% of this funding the security sector (UNSC, 2024b). The consequences? Discontented soldiers, politicians excluded from the coterie around Bol Mel clamouring for petrodollars to be reallocated to salaries, and a dramatic worsening of the economic situation in Juba.

For the elite, the war has nonetheless offered opportunities for economic enrichment. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, traders now bring commodities from Juba and sell them to Sudanese customers, in a reverse of customary flows, which saw the northern state reliant on goods from Sudan. Fuel is the most lucrative market, and the best customer is the RSF, installed at Raiq Mandalla—some 10 km north of Kiir Adem (Majok, 2024). While the state government formally banned the export of fuel to Sudan in November 2023, this has made little difference to current flows: the RSF is desperate for fuel, and the traders for dollars. Flowing south, alongside refugees and returnees, is war loot, including sheet metal, and a flourishing trade in stolen cars destined for Juba (Craze, 2024a, p. 6). All these goods flow into a militarized border economy.

In Western Bahr el Ghazal, there is also a lucrative border trade with the RSF. The RSF purchases goods and fuel in both Wau, the state capital, and Raga county, before returning to Sudan. The paramilitary group also has gold mining interests in Kafia Kingi, in the contested border zone. Western Bahr el Ghazal represents an important nexus for the war economy: gold flows south, to Kampala and Juba, with regular flights leaving Wau for both cities, while fuel goes north.

While connections to the RSF have proved profitable for some in Kiir's circles, they also pose risks. Kiir is walking a delicate tightrope over the war in Sudan, and attempting to appease three sides. When Abdel Fattah al-Burhan visited Juba in September 2024, he came with several demands.[44] Most pressingly, he asked for the cross-border trade with the RSF to stop. Kiir gave an order halting dozens of trucks in Aweil from going north, but this was a pause, not a cessation. In a situation of economic crisis, Kiir does not have the capacity to order the elite to stop trading with the RSF.

Nonetheless, Kiir's first loyalty is to the SAF regime in Port Sudan. Without it, he has no capacity to export oil, as such exports must run through the Red Sea port and, given the current crisis in the RSF—both military and political—the paramilitary force cannot be expected to expand into eastern Sudan in the near future (Craze and Makawi, 2025).[45] Moreover, the SAF regime provides the blueprint for Kiir's model of government. Finally, a shift to the RSF could potentially result in an external backer for rebel groups inside South Sudan—an outcome that Kiir has assiduously avoided.

Negotiations in Port Sudan in the second half of 2024 and into 2025 saw Kiir bring one potential spoiler into the government fold. In talks conducted with the then-chief of the NSS, Akec Tong Aleu, at the beginning of February 2025, Gatwich agreed to a deal that would see him become the deputy commander-in-chief of the SSPDF, with his forces integrated into the army. Whether the deal actually comes to pass remains uncertain; Gatwich signed the agreement under pressure from Ahmed Ibrahim Mufadal, the director of Sudan's General Intelligence Service, which offered Gatwich as part of a package deal. In return for Gatwich's return to South Sudan, Kiir offered SAF the possibility of moving troops and materiel through South Sudan to its beleaguered bases in South and West Kordofan, which otherwise lack supply routes to SAF-controlled territories in Sudan. Tong Aleu's subsequent dismissal, however, has given Gatwich and the SPLA-IO-Kitgwang pause. The February 2025 agreement is only the latest of several agreements that Gatwich has signed with Kiir's regime—none of which have been honoured. Giving up Gatwich costs SAF little—there is no shortage of desperate South Sudanese rebels in the border zone ready to receive Sudanese succour if they need to find spoilers—and they are relatively certain of Kiir's loyalty, especially given SAF's recent successes on the battlefield. For Gatwich, though, the agreement represents a path into ignominy: the last deputy commander-in-chief was Matiep, who took the position in 2006, only to find himself remote from power and far from his troops. The position was retired after Matiep's death, but then reintroduced for Gatwich; he is not wrong to feel foreboding.

Kiir must, however, appease not only SAF, but also the RSF. Some of the areas through which both the Dar Blend and Nile Blend pipelines travel are controlled by the paramilitary group. On 1 November 2024, Kiir's regime made an agreement with the RSF to protect a 237-km stretch of pipeline that passes through their territory. Kiir cannot definitively shut down cross-border trade with the RSF: his control of politics in Juba has partly been achieved by outsourcing revenue collection and economic activity to locally empowered actors, as the Small Arms Survey explored in a previous Briefing Paper (Craze, 2023a). The regime in Juba lacks the absolute strength to block cross-border trade from which some of the elite profits. Finally, just as with SAF, a definitive move against the RSF would invite retaliation, and the paramilitary group has already sponsored militias present inside South Sudan. Buay's SSPM has already fought with the RSF at Babanusa, as have other opportunistic commanders, looking for weapons and payment. For Kiir, the most appealing diplomatic position is to remain neutral, while engaging with both groups.

The possibility of hold-out groups currently outside the ambit of Kiir's regime making common cause with the RSF increases the paramilitary group's potential to unsettle the fragile compact in South Sudan. A further reason for the Tumaini Peace Initiative was to pull those groups closer to Kiir's coalition, and out of the reach of the RSF: if such groups are given sinecures in Juba, they are much less likely to be recruited as spoilers. In Nairobi, hold-out groups have already approached the RSF for materiel and funds. The RSF, however, is leery of moving against Kiir's regime. There is no shortage of desperate recruits inside Sudan and, in October–November 2024, the RSF went on an extensive recruitment drive in Darfur and West Kordofan. It can also recruit among South Sudanese

stranded in Sudan, without worrying about formally including hold-out groups with its coalition. Such groups would make more demands on the RSF's high command than displaced men trying to survive. Furthermore, a formal alliance of the RSF with South Sudan rebel groups would assist SAF's rhetorical claim that the RSF's war is being fought by foreigners. The RSF is still keen—despite the massacres it has committed—to position itself as a legitimate force in the eyes of the international community, and supporting rebel movements in South Sudan hardly helps with such a position. Moreover, at present, Kiir's regime offers the RSF all that it needs: fuel, supplies, shared business interests, and payments for pipeline security.

An uneasy détente is thus the most likely continuation of the current war, relative to South Sudan, with Kiir refusing to be drawn into backing either side in the civil war to his north. This would further enable him to maintain his connections to the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N), under Abdelaziz Al-Hilu, which maintains residences in Juba and moves supplies through South Sudan. A part of this balancing act will be to work out a political agreement with SAF and the RSF if and when the Dar Blend pipeline is restarted: a cash-strapped SAF, largely dependent on Qatari funds for liquidity, has asked for a higher transit fee, while the RSF has also demanded a share of the pipeline fees. RSF officials have also asked South Sudan to cut off payments to Burhan's government by placing the transit-related fees in an escrow account until the war ends—a non-starter for SAF. These demands are bargaining attempts by the RSF to drive up the price it can extract for guaranteeing pipeline security. Despite these entrenched interests, a deal is likely to be found. All sides will benefit from the resumption of oil flow, just as all sides have benefited from the war: livestock exports to the Gulf from Sudan are at an all-time high, thanks to collusion between SAF and the RSF, while, in South Sudan, the elite enriches itself through backroom deals with the paramilitaries (Duffield and Stockton, 2024; Thomas, 2024). In these joint economic activities, the warring elites of both countries are not opposed, but unified.

South Sudan in fragments

In retrospect, the six years that followed the signing of the CPA, prior to independence, were banner years for South Sudanese nationalism. Flows of petrodollars, donor funds, and international good will into Juba gave rise to dreams of a regional economic powerhouse and a liberal democratic state (Craze, 2021; Thomas, 2015). During this period, the SPLM was still a significant political force, and the economic situation enabled the growth of a nascent national bureaucracy (Markó, 2015). There was an immense feeling of optimism about South Sudan, most fundamentally among South Sudanese refugees returning to the country, ready to make a new life.

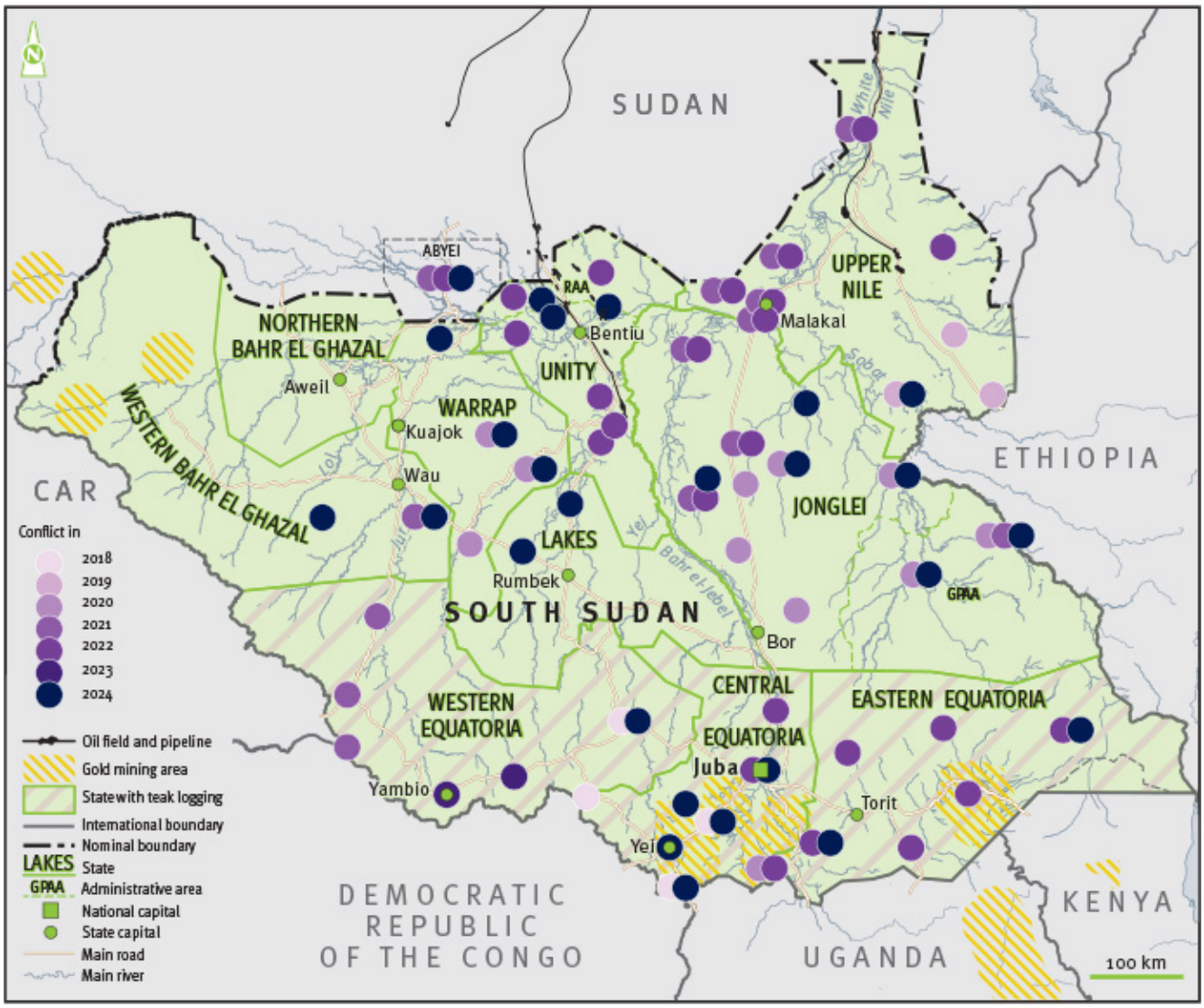
> “For the international community, optimism in Juba proved a means of ignoring the disintegration occurring across much of the country, fuelled by the very processes of state-building that were supposed to render South Sudan a successful country.”

For the international community, optimism in Juba proved a means of ignoring the disintegration occurring across much of the country, fuelled by the very processes of state-building that were supposed to render South Sudan a successful country. A military class, which had initially emerged during the second Sudanese civil war on the back of militarized kinship networks and the appropriation of external flows of humanitarian aid and materiel, grasped hold of flows of petrodollars and donor funds (Craze, 2023a; Pinaud, 2014). It maintained its power in Juba by using political positions as sinecures; elites outside the Juba compact leveraged violence in the peripheries to bid for positions in the centre (Craze, 2022a). In the periphery, the militarization of ethnic and kinship ties—already a feature of the second civil war (Craze, 2022b; Pinaud, 2016)—continued apace. This led to a disintegration of both vernacular and formal institutions: customary authorities increasingly became subject to government control, while the SPLM began to break apart and become a site merely for political competition for positions, with discussion and dissent stifled.

It is this disintegration of the South Sudanese nationalist project that created the backdrop to the civil war that began in 2013. The SPLA had been fractured by Kiir's 'big tent' policy of 2005–06, which had brought in militias formerly backed by Khartoum, and turned the army into a collection of fractious commanders, each in charge of their own individual forces. In response, government elites, lacking any confidence in a fractured army, built up mono-ethnic militia forces, such as the Mathiang Anyoor (Boswell, 2019). The ethnicization of military force in South Sudan, and the growth of militias with direct relations to political actors operating outside the ambit of the formal state, set the stage for a civil war (Craze, 2020) that began as part of a zero-sum competition between elite politicians for control of the patrimonial machine Kiir had constructed, but soon spiralled into a more chaotic conflict.

During the civil war, the fragmentation of South Sudan continued apace. While Western diplomats often depicted the war as a conflict between two belligerent parties—the SPLA and the SPLA-IO—in reality, both sides were collections of actors invested in local struggles but in need of national support and flows of materiel and material. Actors joined the SPLA and SPLA-IO as a means of accessing these flows. It was such rebranding of local struggles as part of a national

Map 2 Armed clashes in South Sudan, 2018–24



conflict—and the recognition later bestowed on these contingent coalitions by the R-ARCSS—that gave the illusion of unity to a fragmented conflict.

The peace agreement consolidated the lineaments of the wartime system (Craze and Markó, 2022). A fractious political elite competed for positions within a centralized dictatorship in Juba, while the peripheries of the country fought for representation on the basis of ethnic and sectional identity. The formation of administrative areas for the Murle (the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, or GPAA) and the Padang Dinka of Unity state (RAA) is exemplary of a broader trend: during fieldwork undertaken from 2018 to 2024, almost every ethnic group demanded its own administrative area, as the national compact fragmented and political power, on the ground, became understood as a series of sinecures to be competed over by ethnic groups.

Such fragmentation has produced conflict across the country. In 2023, a Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper included a map of the conflicts that have occurred in South Sudan since the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018 (Craze, 2023a).[46] Map 2 is an updated version, illustrating how conflict has continued to spread across the country. In 2024 and 2025, contentions over resources and SSPDF atrocities against civilians pitted the Nuer White Army against government forces and allied militias in Nasir, while an ethnicized contention over military positions in Pochalla led to the SSPDF committing widespread atrocities against the Anuak. In December 2024, clashes were ongoing, once again, in Tambura county, Western Equatoria, between the Balanda and the Azande (Craze, 2023c), while conflict had not ceased in Warrap state. Conceptually, one can discern four types of conflict currently scarring South Sudan:

- increasingly ethnicized competitions for political positions and resources, inflamed by politicians in Juba using violence as a means of competing for influence—such as in Western Equatoria and Upper Nile;
- clashes between groups that make zero-sum bids for territory and humanitarian resources, in a situation in which co-existence, given the nature of the South Sudanese state, is almost impossible—such as the Twic–Ngok conflict in Abyei (Craze, 2023b);
- government-backed forces clashing with hold-out groups, the SPLA-IO, or NAS—such as Central Equatoria and Unity states; and
- community resistance to government-backed encroachment (from both Juba and Uganda) on their territory—such as Eastern Equatoria state and Nasir, Upper Nile.

The R-TGoNU, a government of national unity, has presided over a half decade of division in South Sudan. An apparent unity in Juba has been achieved only at the cost of the immiseration and destitution of the periphery. The recent Ugandan encroachment into South Sudan must be understood against this background (Small Arms Survey, 2024b). In Eastern Equatoria, the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) have moved into Magwi county, displacing civilians in a nominally SPLM-IO-loyal territory, and have reportedly begun to farm. In Western Bahr el Ghazal, the UPDF, with an escort of the NSS and the SSPDF, moved to Wau, and then into Boro Medina, in Raga county, where they are overseeing gold mines. These acts may seem like violations of South Sudanese national sovereignty. Both encroachments, however, are backed by elements of the national government.[47] For Kiir's regime, external forces—in this case their Ugandan backers—prove more reliable allies than the people of South Sudan. Such encroachments, then, are a consolidation of the form of private government that has come to characterize Kiir's regime, in which individual actors, even if they are formally within the ambit of the state, make alliances with both external powers (such as Uganda or the RSF) and local ethnic forces, in order to accumulate resources and maintain political domination.

Kiir's shadow

In Juba's diplomatic circles, there is a predilection for focusing on important individuals, believed to hold the clues to divining South Sudan's future. Kiir's potential successors are a favourite topic of conversation around the pool at the European Union (EU) compound. Yet the enduring feature of Kiir's regime, with one key exception, has been the durability of the system, rather than the individuals that compose it. Time and again, Kiir has replaced seemingly essential parts of his coalition. In 2024, he removed one of the longest standing governors of South Sudan, Nguen Monytuil, in Unity state, and replaced him with another Bul Nuer figure, Riek Biem, who he hoped would prove a more popular gubernatorial appointment. This has proved not to be the case: Riek Biem has already been accused of nepotism and of marginalizing other, non-Bul Nuer, groups in the state.[48] Yet there has been no strong opposition to Biem's rule, which has taken on similar lineaments to that of his predecessor (Small Arms Survey, 2023c). Nguen thanked Kiir for the opportunity to serve, but has otherwise remained out of the public eye. Even Kiir's removal of Gordon Koang Biel, the EU- and US-sanctioned commissioner of Koch county responsible for several government-backed campaigns of sexual violence and ethnic cleansing in Leer county, did not lead the former commissioner to revolt.

In comparison to 2005–11, when dismissal from positions or electoral loss frequently caused commanders to revolt and try to leverage violence in order to obtain political positions, the period since 2018 has been notable for the quiescence of the dismissed. Such acquiescence on the part of the deposed is testament to Kiir's power. In the absence of viable external backers for rebellion, and with opposition groups fractured, commanders considering rebellion have had to face the reality of Kiir's overwhelming military and financial domination of the state. The fracturing of South Sudan has meant that while each commander—such as Gordon Koang—may be dominant in their own area, they cannot resist the forces arrayed against them: each commander is weak, relative to Kiir, and dependent on his favour.

The removal of Akol Koor in October 2024 was politically much less risky than the earlier removal of Malong. Malong's forces were largely ethnically recruited in Northern Bahr el Ghazal—where he had earlier served as a commander during the second Sudanese civil war and then as governor during the CPA period (2005–11)—and he treated the force as a personal army: contributing cows to soldiers' marriages and embedding himself within the kinship relations of his forces (Pinaud, 2016). To remove Malong risked an uprising in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. While Akol Koor has extensively recruited in Warrap, his home state, his own section—the Atok—is relatively small, and the NSS is a multi-ethnic force. In multiple conversations with NSS personnel over the last half decade, the author has noted the degree to which their loyalty has been to the institution, rather than the figure of Akol Koor. While Kiir has created private, direct links with the commanders within his coalition, Akol Koor built perhaps the only functional multi-ethnic institution remaining in South Sudan. That, paradoxically, made it relatively easy to remove him.[49]

Juba is now full of warehoused commanders and politicians. One reason that such warehousing is palatable is because Kiir has often systematically empowered both a favoured politician and their rival. Politicians who seemed out for the count are retrieved when it is politically expedient, and used to block rivals who have grown too influential. Also important in explaining the quiescence of dismissed politicians is the sense of positions as sinecures, in which both people and communities take turns. In Akobo, sections of the Lou Nuer talk openly about state-level positions rotating between them, each one availing themselves of the resources of the state for a given period. Politicians, too, get a chance to 'eat', before being replaced. Nguen's long run as governor of Unity allowed him to amass resources that leave him satisfied with being—at least for now—out of political office.

In this system, no individual is necessary—except Kiir himself. Analyses of his rule tend to fall into two camps. Kiir is considered either a strategic mastermind, ruthlessly dispatching his enemies, or a hopeless politician, whose continued survival never ceases to amaze analysts. Neither of these forms of analysis is correct. Kiir is a tactically astute politician—as befits a former intelligence officer—focused on survival. His genius has been to create a system with him at the centre, as the necessary mediating force between rivalrous coalitions, whose shapes constantly change. Many of his frenetic appointments are designed to mollify these coalitions, and represent hedges that prevent outright conflict. Although Kiir is at the centre of the system, this does not make him strong: the more the system is centralized in him, the more he is beholden to politicians whose constant demands he must appease, for there are no mediating institutions other than Kiir himself. Paradoxically, the shutdown of the Upper Nile pipeline has strengthened Kiir's position in the short term, rather than weakening it: the flow of petrodollars is now restricted to his close confidants and family, minimizing the capacity of potential rivals to use oil funds to raise forces.

It is not incorrect to claim that Kiir is the only thing holding South Sudan together. Dinka rivals, in particular, are wary of causing disruption to this system, lest the Dinka coalition splits apart and other groups attempt to take power, with potentially calamitous consequences for Bahr el Ghazal; ethnic hatred towards the Dinka, after years of land occupancy and violence targeting other ethnic groups by predominately Dinka forces, is well entrenched in much of the country.[50] Many of Kiir's decisions have nonetheless eroded confidence in his leadership. Most notably, his support to Adut Salva, his eldest daughter, and Bol Mel, as they engage in widespread corruption and resource extraction, has increased disquiet within the SPLM elite.

> “The elite around Kiir have profited from the immiseration of the nation, which has generated a surplus class of young men that can be conscripted into state security forces, and made to fight wars in the periphery to guarantee positions in the capital.”

Talk in Juba is now not of elections, but of life after Kiir. The question of succession is becoming the central political question for South Sudan’s elite. It is almost certain that this succession will mark a break with the formal terms of the R-ARCSS. The Bahr el Ghazal Dinka elite is insistent that the presidency must stay in the region. A step towards the coronation of Kiir’s chosen successor, Bol Mel, was taken on 10 February 2025, when James Wani Igga was replaced as vice president for the economics cluster by Bol Mel. Simultaneously, elite figures who opposed Bol Mel were removed from their positions, including Akec Tong Aleu and Tut Kew Gatluak. While the coalition around the president’s daughter, Adut Salva, the first lady, Mary Ayen Mayardit, and her brother, Gregory Vasili, favours Bol Mel, he faces significant resistance.

For the SPLM old guard, Bol Mel, a figure from outside the SPLM/A hierarchy who fought during the second civil war, is deeply unacceptable. He is seen as ‘jumping the line’ and his involvement in corruption exceeds even the record set by the SPLM cadres that created the South Sudanese state during the CPA period. The other figures within Kiir’s close circle are politically weak functionaries, chosen for just that reason: they remain unable to challenge Kiir’s position. Their very weakness means they are not viable as presidential candidates. The strength of Kiir’s regime is also the reason it likely cannot continue beyond his presidency. There remains a slim possibility that a SPLM/A veteran from Bahr el Ghazal, such as Daniel Awet Akot, the presidential adviser for military affairs, could command sufficient political capital to enable a peaceful transfer of power, in the event of a serious illness or death.

The best possible future for South Sudan, if it is to minimize violence, is the continuation of the violent structure of Kiir’s regime, under a new dictator. It is likely that this will come to pass. There are no opposition figures with external support, and no one, inside or outside the government, has sufficient military resources to act as a check on Kiir’s government. Despite disgruntlement from the SPLM/A veterans, and anger from Bor that a Dinka from Bahr el Ghazal has once again been chosen to lead South Sudan, the absence of any viable opposition means that the country will likely fall in line behind Bol Mel, Kiir’s chosen successor, despite his lack of popularity.

The alternative—a civil war between fractured military elites—is even worse. Such a war would not proceed along lines consonant with Western diplomats’ imaginary of the last civil war: a conflict between two belligerent parties, which can be ended by a peace agreement that effectively buys off the opposition. South Sudan is now too fractured, and such a war would instead likely be an intensification of the conflicts that currently mar the country, with international actors—including Uganda and Sudan—becoming involved, and southern Sudan becoming a series of localized militarized economies, as it was during the second Sudanese civil war. In such circumstances, the same sort of liberal peacemaking that characterized the CPA and the R-ARCSS (Young, 2019) would produce a fiction of stability in Juba, but not the possibility of real governance in the rest of the country.

Conclusion

John Garang, the original leader of the SPLM/A, was frequently quoted as saying he wished to bring the ‘town to the village’. Rather than an urbanization that saw thousands flee starvation in the peripheries in the hope of employment in the outskirts of cities, as was the case in Sudan in the 1980s (Khair, Makawi, and Craze, 2024), Garang wanted the SPLM/A to generalize urban development across Sudan; his aim was to create education and jobs, and overcome the deleterious centre–periphery relations that had marred the country’s history, in which the peripheries were treated merely as reserves of resources, including cheap labour, and violently policed. A little more than 40 years after the writing of the first SPLM manifesto (SPLM, 1983), the system of rule in Juba looks much like the regimes in Khartoum against which Garang and the SPLM fought.

The elite around Kiir have profited from the immiseration of the nation, which has generated a surplus class of young men that can be conscripted into state security forces, and made to fight wars in the periphery to guarantee positions in the capital. Yet in other ways, the town has come to the village. South Sudan is an increasingly market-based society, and people are reliant on salaries, even as the source of salaries has dried up (Thomas, 2019). The town has also permeated South Sudan’s strongly democratic vernacular institutions, to their detriment: instrumentalization by politicians in Juba has undermined customary authorities and marginalized strong local figures that can pose a challenge to Kiir’s regime.

The village has also come to the town, but only in the worst possible ways. Flooding and conflict have created a more urbanized population, but without an economy that could enable such urbanization to lead to flourishing lives. Urban politics in South Sudan is increasingly an intensification of the same sort of zero-sum competitions that politicians have created in the periphery as a condition of their rule.

The calamitous economic situation and the collapse in wages for the security services have led to an incendiary situation in South Sudan. Confidence in security forces around the country has plunged, and discontent has risen. It is these circumstances, structurally, that will form the basis for the next war in South Sudan. Such has been the success of Kiir’s strategies of division and fragmentation, however, that there is no current basis for an opposition that actually breaks with the logic of the current

regime. While it is true that there have never been rebel movements in South Sudan that are not backed by external powers, it is equally true that successful rebel movements in the region have been based on discontented populations immiserated and impoverished by centralized regimes. Such discontent is all too often seized by an elite class, which turns it to its own ends. The 1983 SPLM manifesto warns against the errors of prior revolutionaries, such as Anyanya I, who merely served to enrich themselves in the same manner as the northern elite, at the cost of the people (SPLM, 1983, p. 22). This warning has been borne out by the current regime. Opposition to the regime has been proven easily neutralized by Juba. Such opposition, though, cannot be reduced to the factions warehoused in the capital: current community resistance against government forces is a resistance against the predatory nature of the state itself, and cannot be solved by yet another agreement worked out in Juba. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

CAR Central African Republic

CPA Comprehensive Peace Agreement

DRC Democratic Republic of the Congo

EU European Union

GPAA Greater Pibor Administrative Area

IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

ISB Internal Security Bureau

NAS National Salvation Front

NCP National Congress Party

NSS National Security Service

OPP Other Political Parties

RAA Ruweng Administrative Area

R-ARCSS Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan

RSF Rapid Support Forces

R-TGoNU Revitalized Government of National Unity

SAF Sudanese Armed Forces

SLA-AW Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid

SPLA Sudan People's Liberation Army

SPLM Sudan People's Liberation Movement

SPLM/A-IO Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition

SPLM/A-IO-Kitgwang Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition-Kitgwang

SPLM/A-N Sudan People's Liberation Army-North

SSDF South Sudan Defence Forces

SSOA South Sudan Opposition Alliance

SSOMA South Sudan Opposition Movement's Alliance

SSPDF South Sudan People's Defence Forces

SSPM South Sudan People's Movement

SSR Security sector reform

SSUF/A South Sudan United Front Army

SSUNA South Sudan United National Alliance

UDRM United Democratic Revolutionary Movement

UNFPA United Nations Population Fund

UPA United People's Alliance

UPDF Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces

Notes

1 Kiir had seen off many rivals in such a fashion, including Paul Malong Awan (Boswell, 2019) and Nhial Deng Nhial (Craze, 2022b).

2 Telephone and in-person interviews with South Sudanese politicians, Juba and Nairobi, September–November 2024.

3 Interviews with international observers and South Sudanese politicians, Juba, Nairobi, and New York, September–November 2024.

4 The national army of South Sudan changed its name from the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to the SSPDF in October 2018. This paper will observe this change of nomenclature, referring to the SPLA prior to this time.

5 Following South Sudanese convention, Akol Koor Kuc is referred to as Akol Koor, rather than by his surname.

6 After weeks of uncertainty, Kiir's regime finally confirmed that Maroldit had been removed as the commander of Tiger Division. He was assigned to Division 1 in Renk but moved to his home area in Gogrial following Akol Koor's arrest. Maroldit, according to some sources, had been plotting with Akol Koor to remove Kiir, though Kiir's main problem with the two men is more likely to have been their opposition to Bol Mel.

7 The attempt was led by Akec Tong Aleu, who had replaced Akol Koor as the head of the ISB of the NSS, souring the relationship between the two men.

8 In December 2024, Deng Wol, who opposed the ascension of Bol Mel, was removed as the chief of defence forces. As of February 2025, Akol Koor is effectively under house arrest, with his residence surrounded by SSPDF Military Intelligence and Tiger Division.

9 This is partly due to Akol Koor's connections to David Yau Yau, one of Babanen's rivals for power in Pibor.

10 Interviews for this Briefing Paper were conducted in Juba (February 2024), in Nairobi (May–June 2024; October–November 2024), and via phone and video calls. This research builds on the author's 17-year long engagement with South Sudan and recent fieldwork undertaken in 2019–24.

11 The Troika is composed of the Governments of Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

12 Lack of funding is also the rationale for the extension given in the official extension agreement (South Sudan, 2024, 4.2.ii).

13 The Eastern and Western Nuer speak different dialects and live in different areas of South Sudan. The Eastern Nuer (the Gawaar, Jikany, and Lou sections) live east of the White Nile and in the Gambella region of Ethiopia, while the Western Nuer are primarily to be found in Unity state and are composed of the Adok, Bul, Jagai, Jikany, Leek, and Nyong sections, among others.

14 The Small Arms Survey's Mapping Actors and Alliances Project in South Sudan (MAAPSS) provided forensic analysis of these appointments and their political repercussions from 2020 to 2021. Published MAAPSS Updates are available here: https://smallarmssurvey.org/project/mapping-actors-and-alliances-project-south-sudan-maapss.

15 For an in-depth discussion of the role the SSOA has played in facilitating Kiir's reign, relative to Jonglei state, see Small Arms Survey (2023b).

16 Telephone interviews with key informants in Aweil, Bentiu, Wau, Yambio, and elsewhere, January–December 2024.

17 For an example of this dynamic in Western Equatoria, see Craze (2023c).

18 This unity was more rhetorical than it was actual: during the second civil war, many communities felt excluded by the SPLM/A, which they viewed as an occupying army (Nyaba, 1997). Nonetheless, Kiir's attempt to re-emphasize the nationalist struggle also explained, for instance, his 2023 choice of deputy governor for Western Bahr el Ghazal (Small Arms Survey, 2023d).

19 For a broader discussion of the relationship between ethnic identity, borders, and political power, see Cormack (2016); Craze (2022a).

20 The deeply flawed UN Population Fund (UNFPA) population estimate conducted in 2021, but only released in 2023, in cooperation with the National Bureau of Statistics, is an example of how a census can generate tensions. It estimated that Warrap state's population was 2.6 million, and gave similarly heightened figures for the other states of Bahr el Ghazal. If the UNFPA figures are correct, Bahr el Ghazal recorded a population growth rate, since the last census in southern Sudan in 2008, of 240%: a rate unparalleled in human history (Mayai, 2023). In contrast, the population figures for many of the areas where one finds SPLM-IO-supporting populations were extremely low, and

showed no growth since 2008. The numbers provided by the UNFPA were subsequently adopted by a number of agencies, including the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), which used it as the base for the 'South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024' and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) for South Sudan—the globally recognized standard for assessing food insecurity. Such utilizations of population figures are politically explosive because they shift the assessment of humanitarian needs and thus the distribution of humanitarian aid. See HCT (2023); IPC (2023); UNFPA (2021). For a study of the IPC, see Craze (2024c); for a study of the UNFPA estimate, see S. and Marko (forthcoming).

21 Leer county is Machar's place of birth, and Gai had been backed by Machar despite his unpopularity among the SPLA-IO's military leadership in Unity state. See Small Arms Survey (2023c).

22 Interviews with SPLM-IO politicians in Kuajok and Warrap town, 2021.

23 See UNHRC (2023); UNSC (2024a).

24 Troika diplomats privately indicated that this would have been the only acceptable justification for extending the transitional process. Conversations in Juba, London, Nairobi, and Washington, DC, January–September 2024.

25 These concerns were not credible. Given the Kenyan government's high-level backing of the talks, it is very unlikely abductions or assassination would have been countenanced. Cirillo's refusal to attend is more likely predicated on an assessment that the Tumaini talks, at best, would lead to rebel groups being absorbed into a government structure that he has denounced as unsalvageable.

26 Telephone and in-person interviews with Buay, Nairobi, 2023–24.

27 Telephone and in-person interviews with UDRM politicians, Nairobi, June–July 2024.

28 The preceding paragraph is based on interviews with Buay, Oyai, Gatluak, and other participants in the Tumaini Peace Initiative who asked not to be named, Nairobi, June–November 2024.

29 Since the beginning of the Sudanese war, Ruto has welcomed the RSF into the Kenyan capital, and has been involved in business deals with the paramilitary forces. Interviews with members of the RSF and Sudan Liberation Army-Abdul Wahid, Nairobi and Kampala, September–December 2024 and February 2025.

30 Telephone interviews with Simon Gatwich Dual, June–September 2024; interviews with SAF Military Intelligence, locations withheld, February–June 2024. In November 2024, Gatwich moved from Rabak to Port Sudan; in January 2025, he announced that his forces would be absorbed into the SSPDF—a development discussed in the next section of the paper.

31 Interview with opposition politician, name withheld, Nairobi, June 2024.

32 Akeen was removed as governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal in June 2024, and replaced with Uber Ajong Mawut. The new governor is from the same family as James Ajongo, who replaced Malong as head of the SPLA and hails from the most prominent Luo family in the state. Hussein Abdel Bagi was removed as vice president on 10 February 2025, following long-standing disagreements with other members of the SSOA and—within Bagi's own South Sudan People's Movement/Army—with Costello Garang.

33 Nhial Deng Nhial is an extremely popular politician from Tonj South, Warrap state.

34 Bol Malek was also soon removed as governor. Francis Marial Abur was appointed the governor of Warrap after Akol Koor's appointment to the position was rescinded in October 2024. He, too, was removed on 19 February 2025, and replaced by the storied SSPDF commander, Magok Magok Deng, who hails from Tonj (see 'Kiir's shadow' section below).

35 Tut Kew was removed as a presidential security adviser in December 2024—a development discussed below.

36 Buay is from the Kwech section of the Bul Nuer. Within the Kwech, he is from the Nyang subsection, and within the Nyang, from the Gangaak subsection. Bapiny Monytuil, the SSOA commander, his brother Nguen Monytuil, the former governor, and Matthew Puljang, the SPLA officer with whom Buay fell out, are all also from the Nyang section of the Kwech, but from the Maloh (or Barpoh) subsection, making the dispute between them one that the Bul Nuer often say is an internal battle within Nyang. Interviews in Mayom county, 2019.

37 Interviews with RSF personnel and South Sudanese rebel factions, Nairobi, June–November 2024.

38 Telephone and in-person interviews with Dickson Gatluak and Johnson Olonyi, Juba and Nairobi, August 2023–November 2024.

39 Akol Koor, whose home base is in Greater Awuul, Tonj North, was replaced by Akec Tong Aleu, from Tonj South, while Maroldit was replaced by Abraham Gum Makuac—also from Gogrial. Both Gum Makuac and Tong Aleu, however, did not last long in their posts. Gum Makuac was replaced in December 2024 by Lual Lual Malok, while Tong Aleu was dismissed in February 2025, due to his opposition to the assent of Bol Mel.

40 Deng Wol, another of Akol Koor's allies, had previously been dismissed in December 2024.

41 Telephone interviews with informants in Mankien, September–December 2024.

42 Interviews with members of the UPA, Nairobi, January 2025.

43 On 10 February, when a pumping station ran out of diesel close to Khartoum, Sudan's capital, the pipeline seized up. The Sudanese state-owned Bashayer Pipeline Company (BAPCO) attempted to remove the oil plug. A day later, the pipeline suffered a severe drop of pressure further south, near the frontline between SAF and the RSF in White Nile state, leading to a rupture of the pipeline.

44 Telephone interviews with SAF Military Intelligence, name withheld, September–November 2024.

45 Telephone interviews with RSF personnel, November 2024.

46 According to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan Human Rights Division (UNMISS-HRD), there was a 24% increase in violent incidents in 2023 compared to 2022 (UNMISS-HRD, 2024).

47 Interviews with sources in Boro Medina, Raga county; Wau, Western Bahr el Ghazal; and Magwi county, Eastern Equatoria, June–December 2024.

48 Telephone interviews with informants in Bentiu, Unity state, November–December 2024.

49 Some of the NSS's funding for diverse economic activities went directly to Akol Koor, and was used to pay for some of the organization's wage bill. This led to a crisis in payments immediately after Akol Koor's removal. By February 2025, however, these flows had been reconstituted.

50 For accounts of ethnically targeted killing by Dinka forces, see Amnesty International (2017); Craze (2019); HRW (2014).

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