# Reliving the War: South Sudan

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For five weeks now, the fabric of the new nation of South Sudan rapidly appears to have come undone. Fighting between factions of the presidential guard in the capital of Juba on 14 December 2013 quickly spread to the headquarters of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (the 'SPLM/A'), the ruling party and former insurgent movement that secured southern independence from Sudan in 2011 – and from there to the oil-producing states of Unity, Jonglei, and Upper Nile. A rivalry between political elites in the capital of Juba appears to have transformed into a conflict reaching roughly half the country that has an unsettling basis in ethnicity, in particular between the Dinka and Nuer peoples. Commanders who had defected to the rebels captured key towns such as Malakal, Bor, and Bentiu (all since reclaimed by government forces). The framing of the ongoing situation as 'tribal' has a basis in truth, but is fatuous without political context. Ethnic divisions, rather than being the instigator of conflict, are instead the most dangerous fault line along which political clashes between elites can be transmitted out to the rest of the country.

**Background to Conflict**

The political sequence of events is now generally agreed upon. At a press conference on 6 December 2013, Former Vice President Riek Machar, a Nuer, accused President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, of an increasingly dictatorial leadership style. Former SPLM Secretary-General Pagan Amum and Rebecca Garang, the widow of the late SPLM/A leader John Garang, joined Machar's protest. Machar's supporters had planned a rally on 14 December 2013, but the SPLM National Liberation Council rescheduled its meeting for that day. Machar postponed the rally, presumably so supporters could attend the meeting, but his supporters walked out after declaring that Kiir had used his opening session speech to criticize them rather than address their concerns. By that afternoon, tensions were high in Juba. It is not clear exactly how the fighting began, but factions of the presidential guard soon began exchanging fire until late into the evening.

As noted, the differences between Machar and Kiir are ultimately political and not ethnic. Kiir spent much of 2013 firming up his control over the nascent South Sudan government, often by replacing figures in the military and civil service with those considered more loyal to him. Machar had held the second highest office until Kiir instigated a cabinet reshuffle in July 2013. Machar and Amum, who was also dismissed in the cabinet reshuffle, were preparing to run against Kiir in the 2015 elections. This falling out did not occur along ethnic lines. Many who aligned with Machar in the dispute, including Amum and Garang, are themselves not Nuer but Dinka or members of smaller tribes. Many remaining loyal to the government, including the army chief of staff, are Nuer.

The most dramatic back-and-forth between rebels and commanders may be over, but the conflict is far from resolved. Political grievances underlying the situation remain. Kiir's consolidation of power throughout 2013 was not illegal, but the resonance of Machar's message demonstrates that there are many, particularly in the Nuer-dominant areas, who are dissatisfied with the president's government. Services outside Juba and key towns are minimal, and many Nuer are sensitive to good governance issues, especially in a government they consider uncomfortably dominated by Dinka.

That political divisions among SPLM/A elites during the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005) often turned into bloody, inter-ethnic competitions when bases were rallied provides an easy template to fall back on in a state with

few effective, nationwide institutions. Machar himself was the leader of a Nuer-dominated faction from 1991 to 2002. By 1997 his splinter group was openly receiving support from Khartoum against the dominant insurgent faction, in which Salva Kiir was a high-ranking commander. This history and atrocities that accompanied it, such as the murder of thousands of Bor Dinka during the early days of the insurgency split, are not forgotten. Machar's regional support and his capacity for deal making nevertheless ensured his representation as the second highest-ranking member of government until the political schism of mid-2013.

**Regional Responses**

While the resurgence of ethnic conflict might remind southerners of those earlier tragic days, there are distinctions between running a state and heading an insurgency. As president of a sovereign country, Kiir has access to levers that give him an advantage in the conflict over his rivals. No state in the region wants a return to conflict, and they are responding to the recent eruption in various ways.

Sudan, first and foremost, appears to have abandoned its former ally in Machar, at least temporarily. During the war, support of the Nuer in the oil regions of southern Sudan was key as it allowed Khartoum to use oil revenues to fund its war effort against the SPLA. Sudan, which has increasing financial troubles of its own, now relies heavily on the transport fees from pipelines connecting landlocked South Sudan to the Red Sea. With an international border in place between the old state and the new one, however, Khartoum understood the political sensitivity of relying on the Machar-backed insurgency to secure oil fields while it fights against a sovereign government in Juba.

Sudan may also recognize that it can use this crisis as an opportunity to reach an agreement with Kiir to stop allowing anti-Khartoum insurgents within Sudan from receiving aid and shelter from Southern Sudanese sympathetic to their erstwhile brethren (many Sudanese insurgents were SPLA members during the civil war). Sudanese President Omar Hassan Al-Bashir met in Juba with President Kiir on 6 January 2014 to discuss the situation, and it is likely the presidents devoted some time to discussing how the two Sudans might help each other with their respective insurgents. Khartoum may also hope that it can use Kiir's gratitude for any assistance to improve its position in the many ongoing border disputes between the two nations that were not resolved by the various agreements ending the second civil war and allowing for South Sudan's independence. Bashir's return to Juba later in January to facilitate regional peace efforts indicates he intends to remain involved.

Uganda has shown its support for Juba in a different way: by actively assisting in the suppression of the Machar-aligned faction. Uganda wants the conflict in South Sudan to end as soon as possible. The nation's birth in 2011 provided Ugandan business with a promising new market, since dominated by Ugandan imports and migrant workers. Just as importantly, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has a relevant history with the leaders of both factions. Kiir is a known entity to Uganda from the time Kampala (under Museveni) assisted the SPLA in its decades-long fight against Khartoum. Machar's intentions towards Uganda have always been more suspect, especially his apparent relationship with the Lord's Resistance Army, the insurgent movement that terrorized Uganda until the formation of the South Sudanese state rid it of its most easily accessible havens across the border. The Ugandan army therefore assisted Juba with two battalions to help retake the town of Bor from Machar loyalists by 18 January 2014.

Other states are more circumspect in their support for Juba, with an eye on resolving the conflict peacefully. Kenya has not committed forces to aid the Kiir government, but has expressed vocal support for Kiir and a commitment to negotiations between factions. There is debate among within the regional body of IGAD, who are organizing negotiations, over whether member state involvement in the conflict might jeopardize the neutrality of that venue. Ethiopia, as host of ongoing discussions, has been critical of Uganda's intervention. China, the largest purchaser of South Sudanese oil, has also backed negotiations to resume the flow of oil through the pipeline to Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

**Political Ramifications**

Neither political side is blameless in this affair. Kiir is not a charismatic political leader, and his bluntness occasionally

shows a lack of political finesse necessary in a fractious political environment. His 2013 reshuffles of cabinet and military members were not mere patronage concessions to his fellow Dinka, but were nevertheless conducted abruptly enough to allow the disenfranchised elites to find common cause with each other, regardless of their ethnicity**.** Whatever Kiir's political faults, he has an ample grasp on military affairs in Sudan. He may well have seen the clashes last month in his presidential guard as an opportunity to settle militarily the lingering challenge Machar and other malcontents have posed to his leadership. While Machar and his supporters may be correct that there was no coup attempt against Kiir (the United States and others have their doubts), he has attached his name and support to the resulting chaos and state disintegration. Those renegade commanders who have attacked their fellow soldiers and the civilians they swore to protect have expressed support for the former Vice President.

Riek Machar's reputation was forever sullied amongst many non-Nuer during the war years when he fought on behalf of Khartoum. He has relied on his political acumen in dealing with elites, both foreign and domestic, to ensure he remained "top Nuer" in the post-war environment. His unwillingness to cede this position to less controversial Nuer figures has also laid the groundwork for conflict; the multiple Nuer ministers Kiir has appointed to his government (many after the July 2013 cabinet shakeup) cannot compete with his personality. Machar has successfully framed his political fortunes as synonymous with Nuer prestige in a Dinka-dominated political landscape. While this may allow Nuer elites to rally to him, it makes his apparent dream to become leader of South Sudan even more unrealistic.

The political and military elites in Juba may have interests other than ethnicity in this dispute, but the defection of Nuer regional commanders such as Peter Gatdet to the rebels in Bor indicates that this is less the case for military elites nationwide. Gatdet made the ethnic motivation for his mutiny clear when he stated explicitly that he was defecting in retaliation for the outbreak of violence against ethnic Nuer in Juba.

Both internally and externally, the crisis is driven by political relationships more than ethnic animosity. Unfortunately, it will be the latter that sees the most civilian deaths in this conflict, a situation that will remain the same regardless of whatever agreement elites eventually make between themselves.

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