

South Sudan's Newest War: When Two Old Men Divide a Nation

Carlo Koos and Thea Gutschke

A political power struggle between South Sudanese president Salva Kiir and former vice president Riek Machar resulted in violent clashes between ethnic army factions in December 2013. Since then fighting has spread across South Sudan and claimed the lives of around 10,000 people.

Analysis

South Sudan has experienced several insurgencies since gaining independence in 2011. Nevertheless, the current war has the potential to be more destructive to the country than previous ones because both parties – President Salva Kiir, an ethnic Dinka, and his opponent, former vice president Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer – are instrumentalizing ethnic identities and pulling their communities into their personal feud.

- A number of latent issues have contributed to the current crisis. These include South Sudan's dysfunctional political system and inadequate political leadership, the historical distrust between the Dinka and the Nuer, and the country's unhealthy dependence on oil rents.
- The civilian population is carrying the cost of the conflict. More than 10,000 people have been killed and more than one million displaced since the outbreak of the latest violence. Livelihoods have been destroyed and more than 3.7 million people, approximately a third of the population, are estimated to be at risk of food insecurity.
- The short- and long-term economic consequences for South Sudan are harsh. Oil production has dropped by 40 percent, severely affecting the state's budget. Trade has suffered. In the long run, political instability will jeopardize foreign direct investment in South Sudan.
- The international community's reaction has been varied: Neighboring countries have supported the government diplomatically and militarily, while the United States and the European Union plan to impose sanctions on the leaders of both sides of the conflict. China has taken an active role in the ongoing peace process.

Keywords: South Sudan, civil war, power struggle, ethnic violence, international conflict mediation

Finally Independence and Then War Again

The recent history of the newest nation on the globe has been troubled. When the South Sudanese voted for independence in 2011, many of them foresaw a future of freedom, peace, development, and prosperity. The international community expected progress, too. Yet since South Sudan's independence in 2012, the world has mostly received bleak news from the country. Reports of ethnic violence, local insurgencies, widespread corruption, the autocratic practices of the dominant Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and border conflicts with the country's northern neighbor, Sudan, have been common in the headlines.

The recent political and violent conflict between President Salva Kiir and former vice president Riek Machar, both members of the SPLM, represents a new dimension of instability. The conflict could potentially result in a failed state, an outcome that could destabilize the whole region. This article summarizes how the crisis has evolved and which latent factors have contributed to it. Based on this analysis, it then discusses the humanitarian and economic implications of the conflict, as well as its impact on South Sudan's international relations.

From Internal Power Struggle to Civil War

The Outbreak of Violence

The current crisis began in July 2013 when President Kiir sacked his entire cabinet, including his chief rival, Vice President Riek Machar, without giving any reasons. Analysts agree that Kiir's move exposed a power struggle that had been taking place within South Sudan's ruling party, the SPLM. A number of senior SPLM members, including Machar and the SPLM's secretary-general, Pagan Amum, had increasingly viewed Kiir's leadership as autocratic. Kiir's decision was apparently also further driven by Machar's aspirations to run as the SPLM's presidential candidate in the upcoming elections in 2015.

There is a distinct ethnic element to power and politics in South Sudan. President Kiir belongs to the Dinka, the largest ethnic community in South Sudan with 36 percent of the population. Machar belongs to the Nuer, the second-largest ethnic community with 16 percent of the pop-

ulation. Although the power struggle between Kiir and Machar is not an ethnic one per se, it has severe implications for relations between the Dinka and Nuer communities. The ethnic equilibrium in the government – a Dinka as president and a Nuer as vice president – has been widely viewed as an important safeguard to preserve stability between the two largest ethnic communities.

At 10:00 p.m. on 16 December 2013, fighting erupted among the presidential guards in Juba. According to military sources, the fighting started when unexpected changes were made to the guards' deployment. An argument between the groups is believed to have ignited the clash that left approximately 20 dead. Other reports say that fighting broke out after President Kiir ordered the arrest of dissident politicians. Following the initial clash, Kiir accused Machar and other SPLM officials of attempting a coup against his government – which Machar denied. Several government officials were arrested for their alleged links to the violence, including Pagan Amum. Machar fled Juba for Jonglei State. In the following days, targeted ethnic killings of civilians took place in Juba, illustrating the immediate ethnic implications of the political power struggle between Kiir and Machar.

During the days and weeks after the clashes erupted in Juba, heavy fighting between army units loyal to the government and rebel forces loyal to Machar spread to the states of Jonglei, Unity, Central Equatoria, and Upper Nile. Machar had the support of 10,000 recent army deserters and a number of local militias. Among the latter was the White Army, which consists of approximately 25,000 armed Nuer youth. The fact that 10,000 troops broke rank demonstrates that almost 10 years of security sector reform in South Sudan have failed to address ethnic fragmentation within the South Sudanese army.

In December 2013, rebels held the strategically important towns of Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal. The latter two are particularly important hubs for the oil industry. Using aerial bombardment (allegedly carried out by the Ugandan army), the government was able to regain control of Bor and Bentiu. Control over Malakal and Bentiu has shifted between rebel forces and government troops several times since the end of 2013. While the army has secured a number of strategically important targets such as major towns and oil infrastructure, the rebels have retreated into the bush and started

attacking government troops using guerilla tactics (International Crisis Group 2014, HIIK 2013).

Failed Cease-fires

After fighting broke out in December 2013, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional association of states including Ethiopia, Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda, quickly mandated three envoys to broker a peace deal between Kiir and Machar. Under the auspices of IGAD, the warring parties signed a cease-fire deal on 23 January 2014. This deal has, however, been violated on several occasions since.

On 10 April 2014, four months after the outbreak of violence, Machar's spokesman announced that the rebels were planning to establish a nationwide rebel government intended to "collectively and adequately address the current concerns on peace, security as well as humanitarian situation in the country" (*Sudan Tribune*, 10 April 2014). Whether or not the rebels will achieve influence in all of South Sudan's 10 states is debatable. Yet their aspirations are of a new quality and dimension. Other insurgencies since South Sudan's independence have been limited to certain areas (George Athor in Jonglei State, Gatluak Gai in Unity State, etc.). They have been instigated by renegade army officers who aimed to increase their bargaining power and obtain a better post in the national army. In other cases local rebellions have been a response to election defeats. In these cases the rebel leaders have generally been bought off with lucrative government or army posts.

Further peace talks between Kiir and Machar, mostly about the destiny of four former senior government officials, including sacked SPLM secretary-general Pagan Amum, were still stalled as of the end of April. On 9 May, after the four detainees had been released from prison and in response to international pressure to end the ethnic violence, Kiir and Machar agreed on a one-month cease-fire and signed a peace deal. Yet only hours after signing, each party accused the other of attacking its opponent's troops in several locations.

In general, both Kiir and Machar have demonstrated relatively little desire to reach a compromise during the peace talks. Despite the fact that thousands of civilians have been killed in recent violence and almost one million people remain displaced, they have been unwilling to overcome their largely interpersonal dispute.

Machar's motives go beyond private benefits for him and his support base. Machar had a major dispute about leadership and democracy within the SPLM with Kiir's predecessor, John Garang, in 1991. He has brought this emotional and ideological baggage into the current conflict and the accompanying peace process; he wants to see change at any cost in what is widely perceived as a Dinka-dominated government. These factors promise to severely hamper reconciliation efforts with Kiir.

Factors Fueling the Current Crisis

The current political crisis and the armed conflict between the government and rebel forces loyal to Machar can be partly explained by the personal motives of and struggle between Kiir and Machar. However, there are a number of additional factors that have contributed to the current civil war that go beyond these two actors' individual decisions.

A Dysfunctional Political System

Formally, the South Sudanese state is well designed. It features a classic division of powers (legislative, executive, and judicial branch), and the federal design takes into account the cultural and regional differences within South Sudan and – in theory – delegates substantial decision-making power to the federal states. The fact is, however, that the South Sudanese central state is largely under the control of the former rebel movement, the SPLM. Former SPLM officers or persons loyal to the group occupy most senior positions in all branches of the state, including the subnational levels. Formal qualifications have rarely been the key criteria for obtaining a specific government position, and the state's performance has suffered as a result. The SPLM's informal networks have sidelined the formal democratic institutions and processes provided through the South Sudanese constitution, which has reduced the population's confidence in the state. The result is a weak state with limited institutional capacity, a lack of legitimacy, and an unhealthy symbiosis between the armed forces, the government, and the state (Koos 2014).

Old Men Facing New Challenges

President Kiir and former vice president Machar were decorated generals during the civil war with

the central government of Sudan. Under their leadership, rebels controlled most of the South Sudanese territory – apart from garrison towns and strategic oil fields. These experiences deeply shaped these men’s leadership style and the way they deal with conflict.

The challenges faced by South Sudan following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 demanded fundamentally different skills. The political leaders were given the task of building a state, with the assistance of the international community. This involved not only creating state institutions but also developing a national identity and reconciling a divided population. In a nation with dozens of ethnic groups and deep-seated ethnic identities, this required that the leaders bring these groups together and facilitate the creation of a South Sudanese identity that transcended ethnic boundaries.

Historical Distrust between the Dinka and the Nuer

Although the Dinka and the Nuer fought side by side against the government in Khartoum for decades, their relationship has been ambivalent. In 1991, internal leadership struggles between late SPLM leader John Garang (Dinka) on the one side and his deputy, Riek Machar (Nuer), and Lam Akol (Shilluk) on the other led to a split within the SPLM. Machar and Akol created the SPLM-Nasir faction. The major blowback for the SPLM (Dinka) was not only that a large faction of its troops broke away in a critical phase of the war, but also that the SPLM-Nasir faction switched sides to ally with the central government in Khartoum. After becoming Khartoum’s new proxy in the civil war, the SPLM-Nasir, consisting mainly of Nuer fighters, killed at least 2,000 Dinka civilians in the town of Bor, in what was known as the Bor massacre, on 15 November 1991. Even though this happened almost a quarter of a century ago, the event remains present in the collective memory of the Dinka and the Nuer and has the potential to fuel resentment in the current struggle.

Oil Rents Sponsor the Government’s Underperformance

Governments that depend largely on income from natural resource extraction often face a dilemma, popularly known as the “resource curse.” This applies by and large to South Sudan, which has the most oil-dependent budget in the world. Govern-

ments that do not depend on their citizens’ taxes and by extension on their citizens’ goodwill tend to do a poor job at policy making, the provision of public goods, and development policy. This has been true in South Sudan. The government has largely failed to improve the population’s living conditions and appears to be much more concerned with internal competitions about rent-seeking and access to resources and power.

The government’s poor performance and its underprovision of public goods is particularly critical in the federal states of Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile. Chronic insecurity in recent years has also hampered development efforts in these areas and increased the population’s dissatisfaction with the government.

Impacts of the Civil War

The current violence, which has now lasted five months, has severely deteriorated the humanitarian and economic situation in South Sudan and in its neighboring countries.

Humanitarian Crisis

Since fighting erupted in Juba in December 2013, seven out of South Sudan’s 10 states have been affected by the violence, which has left an estimated 10,000 people dead and over one million displaced (UNHCR 2014). Large parts of the South Sudanese population have faced atrocities, displacement, and food shortages. As of the beginning of May, fighting and food insecurity had forced more than 400,000 people to flee to neighboring countries. Up to 100,000 South Sudanese refugees had entered each of Ethiopia and Uganda. Yet most of the people fleeing their homes have remained within South Sudan’s borders. Approximately 80,000 of the more than 800,000 internally displaced persons have sought shelter within local bases of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). However, even these supposedly safe camps have come under attack, and people seeking refuge have been targeted and killed.

UN agencies and international nongovernmental organizations are trying to help the 3.7 million people – one-third of the entire South Sudanese population – at high risk of severe food insecurity. At the beginning of April, the World Food Programme announced plans to supply the population of South Sudan’s remote areas with about

30,000 tons of food. By 14 April 2014, it had provided food assistance to almost 600,000 displaced South Sudanese (World Food Programme 2014). However, the government has partly stalled or blocked humanitarian aid supplies. It has also restricted UNMISS patrols and helicopter operations. Hence, the humanitarian situation remains dramatic, and it is the civilians who are suffering most from the crisis.

Economic Consequences: A Setback for Regional Economic Development

Although it is difficult to quantify the decline in South Sudan's output that has resulted from the conflict, severe economic effects have become increasingly apparent, and the country's fiscal position has deteriorated as government revenues have decreased. This has resulted in budgetary constraints and the abandonment of government plans to increase investment.

The disruption of oil production due to the violence has had the largest economic impact, as 98 percent of the government's income stems from the oil industry. When fighting spread to the oil-rich states of Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile, the already-reduced oil output decreased by a further 40 percent since oil-field technicians were either evacuated or fled the troubled areas. Production in the Upper Nile and Unity states declined particularly steeply, with the latter recording a loss of output of about 50,000 barrels per day (b/d) as oil fields were shut down in January 2014. While this drop represented approximately half of Unity State's usual capacity, production in Upper Nile was not as heavily affected. Nevertheless, the output from Upper Nile's blocks 3 and 7, the two most productive blocks in South Sudan, decreased from about 200,000 b/d to approximately 160,000 b/d.

At the same time as the country's oil income has declined, the costs incurred by the conflict have eroded the small funding reserves accumulated since oil exports were resumed in summer 2013. For instance, in February 2014 the country's legislative assembly approved a supplementary budget of 749 million South Sudanese pounds (254 million USD) to cover the costs generated by the conflict.

The impact of the drop in oil production has not been limited to South Sudan: Oil transit fees and money from a transitional financial arrangement constitute an important source of income for Sudan. China, the biggest investor in South Su-

dan's oil fields and the main purchaser of its crude oil, also felt the fallout from the crisis as oil companies such as the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation and Sinopec were forced to evacuate their workers from fields in Unity State.

The violence has also made subsistence farming impossible or considerably more difficult for large parts of the population, thus leading to famine. Furthermore, day-to-day commercial activity in South Sudan has been disrupted, and thousands of foreign workers from neighboring countries have returned home. Several thousand Ugandans working in South Sudan's construction and service sector have left. This has also affected Ugandan society, as remittances from Ugandans working in South Sudan are an important source of income for their families back home. Since 2006, South Sudan has bought 20 percent of Uganda's export goods, making it Uganda's largest customer. The increased insecurity and instability in South Sudan has thus had a devastating impact on the Ugandan economy.

The violence and instability have also affected the small traders and large firms of Kenya, South Sudan's other, growing trade partner. Approximately 20,000 (of 27,000) Kenyans have returned home already, including small traders who have lost stocks and assets. In 2012, Kenyan exports to South Sudan were valued at 209 million USD. Shipments to and from South Sudan accounted for approximately 12 percent of transit traffic at the Mombasa port, an increase of 83.8 percent over 2011. Due to the violence, exports to South Sudan have dropped off, since cargo bound for the country cannot be transported. Large Kenyan firms including banks, road freight companies, and clearing agents have temporarily suspended their work in South Sudan. In 2012, Kenyan banks withdrew approximately 47 percent of their non-domestic profits from the South Sudanese market. Before the outbreak of the current conflict the Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB) had announced plans for further expansion, and the Central Bank of Kenya had held talks to establish an official exchange rate with South Sudan. However, the KCB has since closed three of its 22 branches in South Sudan in response to the violence.

The conflict has also impacted regional economic and political integration. For instance, it has eroded South Sudan's previously slim chance of being admitted to the East African Community in 2014. It has also jeopardized the 20 billion USD

Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) project between Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan, which is to develop a new port in Lamu, Kenya and an oil pipeline from South Sudan. Fighting has already delayed the signing of the agreement on the oil pipeline, which was scheduled for December 2013. If South Sudan drops out entirely, this will impact the project's potential profitability since South Sudan has the major share of oil deposits.

While South Sudan was able to attract somewhat more foreign investment after the resumption of oil exports in mid-2013, the renewed uncertainty about oil production as well as the insecurity and political instability are likely to discourage major foreign investment in the near future. All in all, the conflict is a significant setback for regional integration and development.

Foreign Response: Futile Attempts to Contain the Humanitarian Crisis and Resolve the Political Struggle

Given the conflict's economic impacts and the security and stability risks resulting from the proliferation of small arms in South Sudan's neighbor countries, many external political actors are very interested in securing a cease-fire and settling the conflict. However, these actors are proceeding in very different manners.

Uganda, which views the continuing conflict as threatening its northern regions with instability, has sent troops to support the South Sudanese government militarily. The Sudanese government in Khartoum shares South Sudan's interest in maintaining the stability of and control over the oil fields. However, there is a lack of mutual trust between the two countries. Nevertheless, Sudan has provided cautious support and agreed to send 900 oil-field technicians. Kenya and Ethiopia have supported attempts at conflict settlement through diplomatic means. For instance, Kenyan president Kenyatta and Ethiopian prime minister Desalegn met with Kiir on 26 December 2013 in Juba and have also promoted the cease-fire efforts within the framework of the IGAD. The IGAD-led mediation process, which has already held several negotiations, has been supported not only by IGAD member states but also by development partners and the wider international community. US Special Envoy Donald Booth and EU Special Representative Alexander Rondos – and even the Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi – attended the

cease-fire talks in Addis Ababa. Although China is the most important investor in the South Sudanese oil industry and the largest buyer of its oil, South Sudan is a rather small investment and oil source for China. Wang Yi's attendance at the peace talks is an unusually active stance for Chinese standards, since China normally pursues a strategy of noninterference in other countries' internal affairs. China's approach indicates that the current crisis threatens its interests in South Sudan.

The IGAD members Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, and Somalia have provided support for monitoring mechanisms and peace-keeping troops, increasing the probability of even greater regional involvement in South Sudan's conflict: In order to restore stability, IGAD decided on 13 March 2014 to establish a Protection and Deterrent Force as part of the IGAD Monitoring and Verification Mechanism. This force deployed troops from Kenya, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Djibouti to protect vital installations, including oil fields, in South Sudan. South Sudan also called on Zimbabwe to support IGAD in this attempt. In April 2014, IGAD officially began monitoring the January 2014 cease-fire, deploying military forces to Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal and establishing a joint technical committee. The latter comprises representatives of the two warring parties, IGAD, the African Union, the UN, and other states backing the peace process and is designed to supervise the monitoring of the cease-fire. However, questions about its mandate, composition, and funding remain undecided.

In order to resolve the South Sudanese conflict politically, IGAD, Ethiopia, and South Africa facilitated the formation of an internal SPLM reconciliation forum at the beginning of April 2014. The African Union established a Commission of Inquiry to investigate human rights violations and other crimes committed since the violence broke out.

As stated above, nonregional international actors such as UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations have also provided aid and assistance to the people affected by the violence. On 27 December 2013, the UNMISS reinforcement troops, already mandated before the eruption of the latest political crisis, arrived in South Sudan. On 3 February 2014, the UN launched an appeal for 1.27 billion USD to fund the various aid agencies and organizations. However, the UNMISS has been undermined by interference on the part of the South Sudanese govern-

ment. Not only has the latter impeded aid supplies as well as UNMISS patrols and operations, but it has also hampered UN actions through negative media reports, anti-UN demonstrations, and the harassment of UN staff. This has resulted in a new low in relations between the South Sudanese government and the UN.

Finally, several states from outside eastern Africa have made attempts at conflict resolution. In March 2014, the United States, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the EU threatened to impose sanctions on the South Sudanese government and the Machar rebels if they continued to undermine the peace process by not engaging constructively in the IGAD-led mediation and by not complying with the cease-fire. The threats were dismissed by the South Sudanese government as an interference in its internal affairs and thus a violation of the state's sovereignty. However, as the large-scale violence continues to destroy the country and its society, further UN Security Council members have also considered sanctions. Although the US has authorized targeted sanctions such as visa bans and the seizure of assets, none have yet been imposed.

The external political actors' reactions to the South Sudanese crisis have varied in type and scope. However, the government and the rebels have obstructed both the direct attempts of aid organizations to alleviate suffering and contain the humanitarian crisis and the diplomatic attempts of international organizations and single states to promote the peace process and resolve the political conflict. At the same time, South Sudan's economy and society are becoming increasingly unstable.

Overall, the power struggle between President Kiir and former vice president Machar has dragged South Sudan into a new, serious crisis in which the civilian population is bearing the brunt of the consequences. Neighboring countries are supporting the South Sudanese government both politically and militarily, and IGAD and the international community have increased diplomatic pressure on Kiir and Machar to achieve a peace agreement. However, the two have demonstrated little desire to overcome their personal feud and settle the conflict. It is increasingly apparent that South Sudan's current political leaders are unable and unwilling to deliver what the nation needs most urgently: peace, development, and unity.

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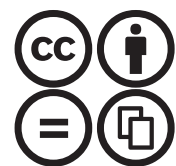
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