

SITUATION UPDATE

October 2023



Manhiem's Mission: Power and Violence in Warrap State

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KEY FINDINGS

- Manhiem Bol Malek was appointed Warrap's governor in November 2022, after the previous governor, Aleu Ayieny Aleu, fell out with Akol Koor Kuc, the director general of the Internal Security Bureau of South Sudan's National Security Service. Akol Koor controls Warrap state.
- Manhiem's governorship has employed the same tactics as his predecessor: he has attempted to quell dissent and intercommunal clashes using extrajudicial killings, the dilution of customary authority, and the repression of dissident populations. Like his predecessor, however, he has not been successful in preventing violence. His interventions, rather than being thought of as the work of a neutral state governor, are experienced by the communities of Warrap as partisan interference on behalf of one or another group.
- In theory, the party of South Sudanese president Salva Kiir, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), should win Warrap state in national elections currently postulated for December 2024. Warrap, however, suffers from a surfeit of politicians—too many to be satisfied by the SPLM positions on offer. In this situation, disaffected candidates may run for opposition parties, and in a situation of minimal civic and political space this could lead to violence in Warrap.

Context

Warrap is the birthplace of Salva Kiir and the seat of his power. The state is home to many of the leading generals and politicians in his coalition, including—most notably—Akol Koor Kuc, the director general of the Internal Security Bureau of South Sudan’s National Security Service (NSS), a man so feared he is seldom referred to by name. Yet despite Warrap’s centrality to Kiir’s regime, since the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018, the state has seen little in the way of development. The money obtained by Kiir’s commanders tends to remain in Juba, or else flow out to regional capitals, rather than being invested in Warrap (Craze, 2022b; 2023b).¹ Rather than developing the state, politicians have plunged it into violence. In the period April–June 2023, there was an 18 per cent increase in the number of violent incidents in South Sudan compared to the same period in the previous year, with Warrap being the state overwhelmingly most affected, with nearly 300 violent incidents (UNMISS HRD, 2023).

Since 2018, the national government has increasingly withdrawn from the provision of wages and services in South Sudan, even in areas that it relies on for political support, such as Warrap. Absent even the appearance of a developmental state, the notion of government—*haukuma*—has become almost exclusively associated with political positions and the resources and power they bring with them.² This has produced a narrowed national compact in which political positions are thought of as properties, to be owned by one or another group, intensifying intrasectional competition.³ Such rivalries challenge analysis that characterizes the conflict in South Sudan as a struggle for Dinka supremacy (Pinaud,

2021): the collapsing national compact in South Sudan has created conflict between Dinka sections just as much as it has set different ethnic groups against each other.

The violence that has convulsed Warrap since 2018 has three central catalysts:

- In response to the technocratic dictatorship instantiated by the power-sharing ratios of the R-ARCSS (Craze and Markó, 2022), in which political appointments are made according to a calculus developed in Juba, politicians have mobilized local constituencies to fight against their opponents as a means of undermining their enemies’ status in the capital. The forces so instrumentalized are *gelweng* cattle guards (Pendle, 2021), which the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army has long used as a supplementary military force (Pendle, 2015; Kuol, 2017).⁴
- Given the ethnic and sectional composition of the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) and NSS active in Warrap, the state’s communities do not see the army and other organized security forces as representatives of a putatively neutral state government, designed to defend the South Sudanese people against aggression, but rather as partisan representatives of particular commanders and their communities. In the absence of security stemming from state forces, it is the *gelweng* that have taken on the role of protecting not just cattle, but their communities as such. This has led to intercommunal fighting between *gelweng* forces that see their struggles in existential terms and respond to attacks from other communities with the same levels of extreme violence that has been meted out to them. Increasingly, the absolute logic of militarized conflict has

1 As set out in a recent Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper (Craze, 2023b), South Sudan’s financial income is increasingly centralized in the office of the president. In the proposed budget for the 2023–24 financial year, for instance, the allocation for the Ministry of Presidential Affairs is SSP 32.6 billion, while that for Warrap is SSP 13.8 billion (Radio Tamazuj, 2023).

2 The most thoughtful treatment of changing senses of government and governance in South Sudan remains Leonardi (2007).

3 The Rek, Twic, and other Dinka groups in Warrap are divided into sections, and these sections are further divided into subsections. A full table of the Dinka sections in Warrap is available in Craze (2022b, pp. 45–50).

4 Cattle guards in Warrap were originally referred to as *titweng*. Both *gelweng* and *titweng* translate as the protectors or guardians of livestock: *titweng* is used among the northern Dinka, while *gelweng* is used further south and has become the common term for both groups (Pendle, 2015). This Situation Update will use the term *gelweng* to refer to both groups.

undermined the moral codes that customarily governed conflict between Dinka sections (Craze, 2022b, pp. 55–59).

- While politicians instrumentalize the *gelweng* and sections struggle against each other, communities also struggle against the state itself. Long shorn of any overarching legitimacy in Warrap, the state survives by dividing Dinka sections and setting them against one another. In this context the *gelweng* cattle guards have emerged as a mode of resistance to the state, just as much as politicians have instrumentalized them as fighting forces. As South Sudan moves ineluctably towards elections, it is likely that this logic of conflict will intensify, as communities rise up to contest a fundamentally illegitimate state apparatus.

Changes at the top

In November 2022, Salva Kiir made two major political changes in Warrap. Peter Mayen Majongdit, the Rek Dinka minister for humanitarian affairs, was removed from his position. More consequentially, Kiir's dismissal of Aleu Ayieny Aleu, the storied military commander and governor of Warrap, brought to a close the latter's almost two-year reign in charge of the state. Using the same techniques as his colleague—and rival—in Lakes state, Governor Rin Tueny Mabor, Aleu had attempted to stamp his authority on Warrap through extrajudicial killings, the detention of customary authorities, and the targeting of dissident populations.⁵ After assuming the governorship in January 2021, Aleu went on a 'peace tour' of Warrap, leaving bodies in his wake, as state security forces made partisan interventions in intrasectional rivalries, while engaging in the harassment of rival communities to Aleu's Noi section of the Rek Dinka (Craze, 2022b, pp. 39–41). Rather than stem intrasectional violence, Aleu's interventions exacerbated it. During his tenure as governor, Warrap remained convulsed by violence, despite his promises that clashes would be stamped

out. Many assumed that it is his failure to reduce violence in Warrap that led to his dismissal as governor on 16 November 2022.

Kiir replaced Aleu with Manhiem Bol Malek, a veteran military commander and the son of Bol Malek, the paramount chief of the Luachkoth, a Dinka section that is part of the Greater Ananatak of Tonj East county. Some hoped that Manhiem's background would enable him to mediate between the Luanyjang and the Greater Ananatak, after clashes between the two groups in 2020–22. Manhiem's accession to the governorship, however, was not about bringing peace to Warrap, but due to a power struggle between Aleu and Akol Koor Kuc, the head of the NSS. In May 2022, Agor Malang Agor, the Tonj South county commissioner, shot an NSS officer during a drunken brawl and had to be replaced.⁶ Aleu's candidate for the commissionership, Deng Chirillo, had previously been a close ally of Akol Koor, but the two men had fallen out after Chirillo backed Paul Malong, the former minister of defence. Akol Koor was strongly opposed to Chirillo's appointment as the commissioner of Tonj South. Despite this opposition, Aleu went ahead with Chirillo's nomination. While Aleu had been appointed at Akol Koor's behest, by 2022, he had emerged as a threat to the director general's control of Warrap.

A further contention between the two men was over the oil-for-roads programme—the single largest destination of public funds in South Sudan and one of the principal ways that Kiir's regime gets funds off the book and into the hands of its associates (Craze, 2023b, p. 10). Central to this endeavour is Bol Mel, a businessman appointed as Kiir's senior presidential special envoy for special programmes in December 2022, and whose companies the United States has sanctioned for their role in corruption (The Sentry, 2021). Aleu was trying to evade Bol Mel's control over the oil-for-roads programmes in Warrap by using his own companies, thus diverting revenue away from the coterie of Bahr el Ghazal Dinka politicians around Kiir.

⁵ For details on Lakes state, see Pospisil (2023).

⁶ Author telephone interviews with Warrap political observers, December 2022–July 2023.

Akol Koor's relationship with Aleu broke down in early 2022, due to the disagreements over the oil-for-roads programme and the Tonj South county commissionership. These contentions led Akol Koor to back Lewis Anei Madut's attempts to remove Aleu from his position as the chairperson of the Tonj community. The ending of Aleu's governorship was abrupt. Earlier in November, Aleu had reshuffled his cabinet, and he had just arrived in Juba in preparation for the governors' forum, before Kiir removed him. The former governor remains in Juba, bitter and brooding, and has subsequently been outspoken in his criticism of corruption in South Sudan's Ministry of Finance.⁷

Manhiem's mission

Just as with Aleu, who had replaced the Twic governor Bona Panek, Akol Koor hoped Manhiem would be a more pliable and loyal governor than his predecessor. Just as with Aleu, Manhiem began his governorship with a declaration that he would bring security to Warrap. And just as with Aleu, things did not quite work out the way that Manhiem intended. He became governor during a series of clashes between the Luanyjang and the Jalwau section of the Greater Ananatak, leading Manhiem to interrupt his own attendance at an event marking the first anniversary of the death of Ajingdit (a Dinka spiritual leader) in Twic county and travel to Tonj East county. There, he deployed the army, suspended a Luanyjang community conference, ordered the entire Luanyjang community to disarm, and demanded that the major Luanyjang politicians leave Tonj East—including Matthew Mathiang Magordit, the former governor of Tonj state and an ally of Akol Koor. The Luanyjang felt these measures constituted the selective, partisan punishment of their community. Manhiem's interventions failed; clashes in Tonj East continued through much of 2023.

Despite this early failure, Manhiem adopted the same playbook as his predecessor, Aleu, in an attempt to instil law and order in Warrap. On 23 September 2023, for instance, the SSPDF extrajudicially killed a man from the Akook section of the Greater Ananatak for a crime he had allegedly committed on 18 September—bringing the number of extrajudicial killings committed by Manhiem's administration to 20 for the year.⁸ The problem with such extrajudicial killings is that they are not an effective means of reducing violence: rather than being seen as the illegal hand of a neutral law, they are perceived as a partisan intervention on behalf of groups close to the state administration.

The recent killing of the noted bandit—or celebrated youth leader—Bol Akol is exemplary of the limitations of Manhiem's approach. While much of Greater Tonj has been relatively peaceful over the past few months, Kirrik payam (Ajak Leer subsection) remains tense.⁹ On 2 July, Ajak Leer gelweng led by Bol Akol raided Manloor payam (Nyang Akoc subsection), taking 40 head of cattle and killing five people. The Ajak Leer were subsequently forced to pay compensation for the deaths of the five people, but complained that this compensation was unfair, for they had received no compensation for their own losses from raids—a commentary on the partisan politics of state government in Warrap.¹⁰

On 22 August, Ajak Leer gelweng under Bol Akol's command returned to Manloor to retrieve the cattle that they had to pay in compensation for the 2 July raid. The SSPDF then intervened and attempted to arrest those they thought responsible for raiding Manloor, along with an Ajak Leer subchief. In the ensuing clash, three soldiers were wounded and Bol Akol and two soldiers were killed. The Ajak Leer subchief also died of suffocation after the SSPDF detained him inside a container.

For many Ajak Leer, Bol Akol had no choice other than to raid and recover the cows taken from him; he had previously explored legal avenues to recover

⁷ Author interviews with Warrap politicians, Juba, August 2023.

⁸ Author telephone interviews with international observer with knowledge of the proceedings, September 2023.

⁹ The payam is South Sudan's third administrative level, under state and county; payams are divided up into bomas.

¹⁰ Multiple author telephone interviews with Warrap politicians, Warrap political analysts, UN sources, and international observers, September 2023. The following four paragraphs are based on the same interviews.

cattle he had lost in raids by other groups, but was blocked by officials opposed to his community. In the absence of a neutral state government able to mediate between communities, actors like Bol Akol feel they have no choice but to take the law into their own hands. This is a dilemma that Aleu also encountered, and to which Manhiem has as of yet found no answer.

Events in Tonj

Much of Warrap is relatively peaceful at present. This is partly a function of the seasons: with the end of the rains in September 2023, the gelweng and their cattle have moved back to their communities, lessening the occurrence of raiding. In August, much of the population of the state was engaged in the harvest, further lessening the likelihood of clashes.

Fighting has subsided in Tonj East between the Luanyjang and a subsection of the Jalwau (Adoor), after a series of intense clashes over disputes over *toic*—seasonal grazing land—and intermittent cattle raiding that occurred at the beginning of the year. In February 2023, some 143 people were killed in incidents on the border with Rumbek North county, Lakes state, and the SSPDF moved into the area to suppress further clashes. While much of Warrap state is now relatively peaceful, conflict continues, however, between the Noi section—that of Aleu, which is closely linked to the Atok, the subsection of Akol Koor—and the Ajak Leer of Kirrik payam, with almost 200 head of cattle being raided from the Noi on 17 August 2023. The Noi retaliated by abducting four women from Kirrik payam shortly thereafter. The Tonj North county commissioner then attempted to intervene and resolve the issue by asking the Noi youths to return the three remaining abductees (one was killed during the abduction). The youth demurred, and asked about their stolen cattle, leading to a stand-off in which one of the commissioner’s officers was shot. The matter was finally resolved through the intercession of customary authorities, but it is once again indicative of the difficulties that the state has in intervening in intercommunal conflict, given its perceived lack of neutrality.

Electioneering

On paper, Warrap is an easy election win for Kiir and the SPLM. During the South Sudanese civil war (2013–18) there was no Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) presence in the state, and Warrap was relatively stable and united against opposition forces elsewhere (Craze, 2022b, pp. 17–25). Under conditions of existential risk, the border between Western Bahr el Ghazal and Warrap states became at once political and ethnic.

After the signing of the R-ARCSS, however, the SPLM-IO began to have a presence in Warrap thanks to the power-sharing formulas of the peace agreement, and was assigned positions representing the state’s more peripheral communities. Gogrial East, for instance, was initially proposed as an SPLM-IO county before an outcry from its political class; Tonj East, a more politically marginal county, ended up receiving an SPLM-IO commissioner (Craze, 2022b, pp. 27–31). The SPLM-IO appointments in Warrap were not meaningfully connected to Riek Machar’s opposition party in Juba. Rather, they were composed of disaffected members of Warrap’s elite who were excluded from SPLM positions in government and were looking to take advantage of the technocratic formulas of the peace agreement. In such a situation many think the elections postulated for 2024 will be a chance for Kiir to ‘clean house’, with Potemkin SPLM-IO politicians being reabsorbed into the SPLM.¹¹

Since the start of the civil war in 2013, however, the SPLM has been dismembered as a party, and decision-making power concentrated in Kiir’s inner circle (Craze, 2022a; 2022b). Political power is now more about individual politicians and community identity than about the SPLM party machinery. In such a situation, the SPLM-IO may prove to be more divisive than many think. In August 2023, one young Juba-based politician mused that the line for SPLM positions is very long and organized by seniority. One way to jump the queue would be to join an opposition party and so cause sufficient problems for the SPLM to be invited back into it.¹² This may artificially boost the number of opposition cadres in the run-up to elections in 2024.

¹¹ Author interviews with Dinka politicians, names withheld, Juba, August 2023.

¹² Author interview with Dinka politician, name withheld, Juba, August 2023.

Kiir's problem in Warrap is that there are more politicians than there are government positions, a situation that will not be entirely assuaged by the expansion of the National Legislative Assembly by 82 seats, from 250 to 332. In particular, figures such as Aleu may seek to run as independents, capitalizing on popular disquiet with the SPLM in Warrap. Legislative attempts to force all parties who wish to stand for election to have representation in multiple states across South Sudan are bids to foreclose the possibility of independents' running for gubernatorial positions, and thus avoid the challenge to Kiir's coalition that was posed by politicians like Angelina Teny and Joseph Bakosoro in the 2010 elections. Such restrictions, however, may strengthen the SPLM-IO's hand by forcing would-be-independent politicians into broader opposition coalitions.

The SPLM-IO is clearly preparing for elections in Warrap, with the opposition's secretariat being launched in January 2023, and a sweeping change in almost all SPLM-IO positions in the state announced on 25 September, including the opposition's two commissioners in Twic and Tonj East counties. Even if the SPLM-IO profits from divisions within the Warrap political elite, however, it is not clear that it will have sufficient political space to manoeuvre. On 14 February, two SPLM-IO members were arrested in Tonj South following attempts at mobilization, while further arrests of opposition cadres occurred in Tonj North and South in May 2023. Despite the formal guarantees of the 2023 amendment to the 2012 National Elections Act, which was signed into law on 26 September 2023, there is effectively no space for political opposition to function in Warrap (UN HRC, 2023). This fact, when combined with the sheer number of politicians vying for political office, threatens to create an explosive electoral process in Kiir's home state.

Difficulties at the borders

As much as violence has scarred Warrap internally in 2023, the state's fiercest clashes have occurred in conflicts with communities outside the state. As set out in a prior HSBA publication this year (Craze, 2023a), the clashes between the Ngok Dinka of the Abyei Administrative Area and the Twic Dinka of

Warrap state that began in February 2022 are fundamentally economic in nature and are over control of the once-populous border market of Annet and the former humanitarian hub of Agok. Despite a series of agreements between the two sides, the Twic Dinka have maintained a rhetorical stance that lays claim to the territory of southern Abyei, even though it was delimited as the territory of the Ngok Dinka by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2009 (Craze, 2013). The Twic have tried to ensure that this area has remained depopulated, following the displacement of the Ngok Dinka inhabitants of the territory after Twic attacks in February–March 2022. In 2023, the Ngok Dinka have taken a more aggressive stance: their youth forces have repeatedly attacked Twic county, with the Twic responding with raids into southern Abyei. In August–September 2023, the Ngok Dinka attacked Ajakuac payam, Twic county, while clashes continued around Agok, where the Ngok Dinka have attempted to maintain a presence, despite Twic warnings that the south of Abyei is a disputed territory (Craze, 2023a).

Further difficulties have occurred on the border with Unity state. Since the signing of the R-ARCSS, the Bul Nuer of Mayom county (Unity state) and the Rek Dinka of Aliek, Alabek, Akop, and Marial Lou payams of Tonj North county (Warrap) have raided each other. Kiir's inner circle put pressure on the then-county commissioner, Manime Gatluak—the brother of Kiir's influential security advisor Tut Kew Gatluak—to prevent raids into Warrap from Mayom. In 2019, Manime attempted to prevent such raiding, leading to clashes between his bodyguards and the Nuer spiritual leader Gatdeng. This alienated core parts of the Bul Nuer, some of whom joined Stephen Buay's rebel South Sudan People's Movement/Army, while others connected to Buay fled to Ajakuac payam, Twic county, Warrap, with the spiritual leader Gai Machiek, whose mother is a Twic Dinka. Gai Machiek, who is the third of his line to be possessed by the spirit Diu, has subsequently been active in Warrap and remains close to Buay's rebel forces.

Further complicating matters is the fact that Bul Nuer have fought on both sides of the Twic–Ngok Dinka conflict, with wild rhetorical claims made by Ngok and Twic politicians about Buay's participation in the clashes. Underlying what amount to conspiracy theories, however, are more prosaic concerns.

The interest of the conjoined Bul Nuer–Rek Dinka political elite is to maintain an orderly border between Warrap and Unity, keeping together the government coalition—even if, as is the case, some members of this class benefit from interstate raiding. Young cattleguards do not benefit from this political arrangement, however. As a result, short-term goals, including acquiring livestock through raiding, trump the concerns of the political class. Thus, while the new Mayom county commissioner, John Bol Mayik, has had some success in negotiating with Gai Machiek, raids continue—including, for instance, a Bul Nuer raid on Pandit village, Twic county, on 25 September 2023.¹³

Conclusion

After the violence of the first half of 2023, Warrap state is now relatively peaceful and enjoying the relative abundance of the harvest. Such tranquillity, however, is not likely to endure. Zero-sum competitions for territory and economic power between the Twic and the Ngok Dinka have no clear resolution. In Greater Tonj, partisan government interventions and disarmament campaigns focused on particular communities have resulted in high levels of displacement and egregious violence over the past three years. In theory, a more neutral state government that tried to rise above the communities that it represents would guarantee more peace and stability in Warrap. Since 2013, however, the structure of the South Sudanese state has reinforced ethnic and sectional divisions as a form of rule, setting Warrap’s communities against one another, as politicians pursue power in the capital by fomenting unrest in the peripheries of the country. In this context, greater state presence has reliably led to more violence. With elections scheduled for December 2024, there will be a concomitant press for political positions in Warrap, and with that will come increased tension and, very likely, further violence. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|----------------|--|
| NSS | National Security Service |
| R-ARCSS | Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan |
| SPLM | Sudan People’s Liberation Movement |
| SPLM-IO | Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition |
| SSP | South Sudanese pound |
| SSPDF | South Sudan People’s Defence Forces |

¹³ Author telephone interviews with international observers, September 2023.

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