

## MAAPSS Update

25 March 2021

### Unity State: New appointments and developments

#### What's new in Unity

- In Koch county, recently reappointed commissioner [Gordon Koang Biel](#) has been attempting to reassert his power over restive Jagei youths, who have been raiding in Rubkona county. Backed by South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) under [Jagei Jany](#), Koang's interventions amongst his own Nuer subsection risk creating further cycles of conflict, as alienated youths raid into Rubkona county, and while the SSPDF and Koang conduct increasingly violent campaigns to repress the Jagei Nuer.
- The Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition's (SPLA-IO) nominations of weak, locally unpopular figures for state-level positions, and for county commissioner positions, underline the opposition's acquiescence to the government's (SPLM-IG) political dominance. The unpopular SPLA-IO appointment for county commissioner in Payinjiar risks further alienating its base support in southern Unity state.
- Overall, state-level appointments in Unity confirm the dominance of the clique of military and political leaders around the Bul Nuer governor [Nguen Montyuil](#), and the Leek Nuer descendants of Tungwar Kueingong Ret—a prominent customary leader in Rubkona county—who have maneuvered themselves into positions of power at every level of

the state administration, as well as in the world of NGOs.

#### Why does it matter?

- Following the establishment of the Ruweng Administrative Area, Unity state is now a mono-ethnic Nuer state, as well as in theory being the well-spring of SPLA-IO support, as well as the birthplace of [Riek Machar](#), the opposition's leader. Political changes in the state thus constitute a bellwether for broader changes in levels of support to the SPLA-IO.
- In much of the state, the government and the variety of South Sudanese oppositions that operate in Unity are increasingly unified. SPLA-IO cadres appointed to positions of power within the state administration or as county commissioners are drawn from a small circle of Machar loyalists and family members, and their appointments are designed to be politically palatable to the Montyuils in Bentiu. This means that the opposition county commissioners in southern Unity, like the government appointments to the same region, are external impositions, without popular support on the ground—a situation that does not suggest that those commissioners have the capacity to control recent outbreaks of revenge raiding in Mayendit and Payinjiar counties, or that the SPLA-IO can maintain meaningful levels of political support in the region over the long term.

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- The increasing distance between state-level political appointments and the sentiments of the communities on the ground, and of the customary authorities, suggests that the capacity of local political figures to control communitarian forces by means other than explicit violence is increasingly limited—a situation that does not bode well for the prospect of future political stability in South Sudan.

## What does the future hold?

- Reportedly, Kiir will allow Machar out of Juba to conduct a tour of the country in 2021, and visit the various governors and deputy-governors that he has appointed after consultations with the SPLM-IG. In Unity, it is likely that this tour will encounter turbulent waters. In Payinjar, community leaders have insisted that [William Gatgiek Mabor](#)—the SPLA-IO-appointed county commissioner—was not their choice, is not welcome in southern Unity, and should remain as ‘a commissioner in Juba,’ much like the pseudo-potentates the government appointed for SPLA-IO territory from 2013–20, who governed by press releases from Juba, while the SPLA-IO had effective control on the ground. Unlike from 2013–20, it is now the SPLA-IO that is in Juba, controlling the map but not the territory, while customary authorities and local militia forces control the counties of southern Unity, often still using the name SPLA-IO, but remote from its leadership in Juba.
- The government appointments of [Stephen Taker Riek](#) as commissioner of Leer county and of [Gordon Koang Biel](#) as Koch county commissioner will likely lead to further raiding and violence in both counties; both men are unpopular and divisive choices and will essentially rule as the heads of occupying armies. Both will likely use violence to accumulate cattle and to quell discontent with their authority. However, the violent responses to these appointments will probably remain localized; decisions about broader military campaigns, such as southern [Unity witnessed in 2015](#) or 2018, for instance, are made in Bentiu, and for now, Nguen Monytil has little interest in pursuing the remnants of whatever forces oppose his rule into the swamps of the south of Unity state.
- The weak county commissioner appointments for Leer, Mayendit, and Payinjar are likely to be accompanied by increased raiding in Dinka communities bordering Unity state—in Warrap, for instance—as the commissioners will be unable to exert enough power over the youth to prevent such raids. In Mayom County, in contrast, the appointment of [James Chol Gatluak Manime](#) as commissioner is likely to partially prevent raiding into Warrap, the source of frequent altercations between the Twic and the Bul Nuer in recent years. Manime is the brother of [Tut Kew Gatluak](#), [Salva Kiir](#)'s influential security advisor, and a figure who is relatively popular in Mayom county thanks to his largesse; reportedly, some of the money he purloined from the various security funds he administered in Juba was reallocated to the Bul Nuer community. Manime is thus able to exert some control over Bul Nuer youths.

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## Main Developments

### State-level appointments

On 22 February, Salva Kiir announced the appointments in Unity State to state government positions, including advisers, and chairpersons for state commissions, as well as county commissioners. Noteworthy appointments included [Lam Tungwar Kueigong](#) as Minister of Housing, Land, and Public Utilities. Lam Tungwar is a Leek Nuer from the Cieng Chuol section, who was born in the Kaljak area, Rubkona county, and is the son of the popular Paramount Chief Tungwar Kueigong Ret. His brother is [Tor Tungwar](#), the deputy governor of Unity state, and former SPLA-IO military governor of Unity state. Other brothers work in the humanitarian industry, while one of his sisters married Nguen Monytuil, formally joining the two families, both of which straddle the opposition-government divide.

Two sets of brothers now occupy politically and militarily central positions in Unity state. Nguen Monytuil is the governor, and in theory a member of the SPLM-IG; his brother, [Bapiny Monytuil](#), is the leader of the opposition South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) and a member of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), for which he is the secretary for security affairs. Relations of kin, in this case, prove stronger than the provisional grouping to which each brother pays nominal fidelity. Indeed, the attention

the peace agreement pays to these groupings and their relative weight in terms of position (that SSOA should get a specific number of positions, SPLA-IO another number) obfuscates the more central alliances that determine politics in Unity state. In Bentiu, the Leek and Bul Nuer elite have made a pact, through the families of the Tungwars and the Monytuils, at the expense of [Taban Deng Gai](#) and a variety of Bul Nuer challengers to Nguen's crown. It is this Bul-Leek axis of power that currently holds sway in Bentiu.

### The reorganization of the SSPDF

In January 2021, Salva Kiir's proposed reorganization of the SSPDF was circulated, though it has not yet become public. In Unity state, the SSPDF remains largely unchanged, with [Akol Majak Nyigan Aco](#) continuing as commander of SSPDF Division 4, and [Carlo Kuol Ruai Kuony](#) as his deputy. Division 4 is the only regular division that retained both the commander and the deputy commander. As in other states—notably in Northern Bahr el Ghazal—the ranking SSPDF officer in Unity is not Nuer, but rather a Kiir loyalist from out of state, and thus less likely to make common cause with potentially rebellious forces within the state. The theory, anyway, is that Aco's independence from Bentiu politics makes him more likely to be loyal to Juba.

Aco's reappointment as Division 4 commander is also recognition of his role in assuring the peaceful transition of Division 4's special division, a mono-ethnic Bul Nuer force based in their

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heartland: Mayom county. Its former commander, [Matthew Puljang](#), was dismissed on 24 April 2020 after Tut Kew Gatluak and Nguen Monytil schemed to bring him to Juba in order to separate him from his forces before dismissing him. Puljang's powerful Division 4 special force was paid directly by the office of the president and was answerable to Salva Kiir rather than to the Division 4 commander in Bentiu. Puljang's relative autonomy posed a threat to Nguen Monytil's control of Mayom, and thus his control of Unity state more generally. In recent years Matthew Puljang has been increasingly ill, and spending much of his time in Uganda undergoing medical treatment. Nguen Monytil and Tutkew Gatluak saw Puljang's weakness as an opportunity to remove him as a rival, which they did successfully. Division 4 special division then went under Aco's direct command. While some of its soldiers and Puljang's men have raided into Warrap, and controlling the Bul Nuer youths remains difficult, Aco is widely thought to have handled his part in this transition with aplomb.

While in 2020, Monytil, Tutkew Gatluak, and Aco handled the removal of Pulang; [Tayib Gatluak](#) engineered the arrest and dismissal of the popular Bul Nuer commander, [Stephen Buay](#). In the January 2021 reorganization of the SSPDF, Tayib Gatluak, also known as Tai Tai, was recognized for his role in the removal of rivals to the Monytils and Tutkew Gatluak with the position of deputy commander of SSPDF ground forces—under [Boutros Bol Bol](#)—one of the most important military positions in the country. Tayib Gatluak and Nguen Monytil are rivals for power, but also

work together—and in 2019-20—when the opportunity to get rid of a mutual rival arises.

Following Puljang's removal, he was kept under house arrest in Juba, while amongst the Bul Nuer political elite in mid-2020, Bapiny Monytil led an elaborate negotiation that brought two dissident figures, Puljang and Stephen Buay—effectively the two losers to the Monytil brothers in the competition for Bul Nuer power in Bentiu—back into the fold. Puljang's rehabilitation, albeit as a weakened figure forced to accept the new balance of power, allowed him to return to Unity in the January reorganization of the SSPDF, as head of military production for Division 4. This role puts Puljang in a potentially lucrative position. In theory, military production deals with the army's agricultural production. In reality, it likely leaves Puljang to play the military's part in government land deals with the international corporations that have been buying up land in South Sudan since 2006, often in legally dubious arrangements. Puljang's archenemy, the Bul Nuer [Michael Makal Kuol Deng](#)—who formed an alliance with Taban Deng Gai in 2010—became head of military production in Abyei, effectively removing him from Unity state, but in a potentially lucrative position. The transfer of Kuol Deng to Abyei from Unity further weakens Taban Deng Gai's position in the state.

## **Tutkew Gatluak and the politics of Mayom county**

The most important county in Unity, whence much of its political and military elite hails, Mayom is a crucible for the

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violent antagonisms produced in the rest of the state. Puljang's removal from power in 2020 enabled Tutkew Gatluak to consolidate his own power in Mayom county, thanks to Kiir's appointment of his brother, [James Chol Gatluak Manime](#), as commissioner. Manime's ascension to power puts up another blockage to Taban Deng Gai, who is cutting an increasingly remote and unimportant figure in Kiir's administration; his political grouping was given none of the positions they claimed in the February-March dispensation of state- and county-level positions throughout South Sudan. Manime can only be overjoyed by Taban Deng Gai's marginalization—not only did Gai burn down Mayom county in 2008-10 while governor of Unity state, he also forced Manime to flee southern Sudan in 2010.

Manime is a popular figure in Mayom. Unlike Matthew Puljang, he is not a military commander, and thus presents less of a threat to Ngen Monytuil's control of Unity. However, it is unlikely that Manime will be able to actually address Mayom county's substantive problems. Increasingly formal divisions of payam boundaries (what were once counties in the 32-state division of South Sudan) have intensified inter-sectional raiding and conflict as what were shared areas of collective grazing have become the site of sectional, ethnicized claims to land rights. This problem is structural, and unlikely to be solved by a country commissioner who can be expected to be more interested in the cattle he can obtain through fines and taxes, just as the last commissioner was.

### The Permanence of Gordon Koang Biel in Koch County

Like Manime, [Gordon Koang Biel](#), the reappointed Koch county commissioner, served with the Bul Nuer commander Paulino Matiep's South Sudanese Independence Movement/Army (SSIM/A) during the second civil war. While Manime, along with Tut Kew Gatluak, was largely a political figure coordinating between the SSIM/A and its supporters in Khartoum, Gordon Koang Biel was a famous commander who effectively ran Koch county as a personal fiefdom. Like Bapiny Monytuil, Biel was absorbed into the SPLA in 2006, following the Juba Declaration. In 2013 he sided, along with the Monytuils, with the government, and was rewarded with the position of county commissioner of Koch. From 2014–18, Biel raised Jagei Nuer militias to fight in southern Unity, which participated in some of the worst atrocities of the South Sudanese civil war.

Following his dismissal from the county commissionership in 2018, Biel threw his hat in with Taban Deng Gai, and his militia forces worked in concert with Gai's in Guit in 2019. However, with Gai's fall from Kiir's grace, Biel returned his loyalties to the Monytuils, and was reappointed commissioner in late 2019. He remains a useful and violent force for the Monytuils, though his standing in his own Jagei Nuer community is falling. The Jagei Nuer do not feel like they have received their share of the plunders of 2018–19 and are aware that the Leek Nuer of Rubkona stand far higher in the political ordering of the state.

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Jagei Nuer youths, alienated by Biel's efforts to be useful to Nguen Monytil and to maintain relative peace with Koch's northern neighbours, raided the Leek in January 2021 and have ambushed and harassed traffic along the Bentiu road. This has embarrassed Biel and undermined his claim to importance in the state, for these attacks indicate he no longer has control of the Jagei Nuer youths. In February 2021, Biel sent the SSPDF—led by his former rival for the position of county commissioner, [Jagei Jany](#)—into Koch county to recover the cattle stolen from the Leek by the Jagei Nuer, further eroding Biel's popularity in the county, and seemingly committing the county to a further cycle of violence.

## The Return of Stephen Taker Riek Dong in Leer County

Given his distance from the youth forces in Koch, and his increasing reliance on external military support, Biel resembles a figure with whom he otherwise has little in common: Stephen Taker Riek Dong, now reappointed by the government as commissioner for Leer County. While Biel was an established military leader during the second civil war, Stephen Taker was a trader and civilian who parlayed his relative wealth into political power, first becoming the member of parliament for Leer county and then county commissioner. In the latter position, he was exceptionally unpopular and so corrupt that even Taban Deng Gai felt forced to dismiss him in 2010.

Like Biel, Stephen Taker rode the wave of government power to a position during the current phase of the South

Sudanese civil war, becoming Leer county commissioner again in 2014, in which role he led government attacks that razed villages in Leer. He also participated in campaigns into southern Unity from 2014–18. He is generally hated by the local population, who immediately led protests against his appointment. Taker will command an effectively occupying force in Leer county, with the SPLA-IO still in control of the majority of the territory. [Chap Kai Dhuor](#) is the current Leer SPLA-IO commissioner, while Brigadier [Kuong Kuony Dhoal](#) is the SPLA-IO operations commander and the leader to whom the Nuer communitarian youth militias, or *Gojam*, report.

Taker's reign is likely to focus on the forced pacification of dissident elements in Leer county and the extraction of capital—in the form of livestock—via taxes and fines.

## Opposition impositions in Payinjar

The appointment of [William Gatgiek Mabor](#) by the SPLA-IO in Payinjar county follows the pattern established by the rest of the county-level appointments in Unity state: the preferred figures are obedient and dependent on external support, with loyalty to Bentiu or Juba rather than to local constituencies. This form of local politics as external imposition is more generally likely to increase friction on the ground throughout Unity state. In Payinjar, the local customary authorities had supported the commissionership of [Justin Machien](#), and, when the SPLA-IO blocked Machien, supported [Michael Lot Gatluak](#). Both these recommendations were ignored by Machar, who chose

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Mabor, one of his former bodyguards, for the position of commissioner. Mabor is not well-liked in Payinjiar, and the population feels that the SPLA-IO is remote from the community's concerns and interested only in maintaining its own powerbase in Juba. [John Tap Puot Kang](#) remains the most popular political figure amongst the SPLA-IO in Payinjiar; Mabor has been warned by the customary authorities in Payinjiar to be a 'commissioner in Juba' and not to set foot in southern Unity. This power vacuum, however, with Payinjiar effectively being controlled by SPLA-IO commanders that are not recognized by the SPLA-IO in Juba, is unlikely to enable a reduction in current rates of violence, which are high due to revenge killings and raiding in Mayendit and Payinjiar counties, and which look set to continue in the months to come.

## Conclusion

The SPLM-IG, SSOA, and SPLA-IO are increasingly part of a single system of power in Unity state, centered on the Monytil brothers and the Tungwar family's control of Bentiu, and the Bul Nuer military and political compact centered on Tutkew Gatluak and Tayib Gatluak in Juba. The SPLA-IO around Machar—distinct from those IO figures such as the deputy governor, Tor Tungwar, who have thrown in with the Monytils—are reduced to a series of family appointments and loyalists—like Mabor—that have little power on the ground. Elsewhere, government appointments in Unity repeat the pattern of the current civil war, 2014–21 to have effectively ruling colonial forces in hostile territory led by putatively local leaders with little to no support on the ground. Witness the permanence of

such figures as Stephen Taker and Gordon Koang Biel.

It is unlikely that such a system will be stable. Government control is predicated on the coronation of these locally weak figures who rely on external support. Such a reliance increases their alienation from local populations excluded from the political compact in Juba. Those populations will be increasingly unlikely to be controlled by such figures, leading to increases in raiding and SSPDF retaliation. The creation of local government in Unity state, in other words, is likely to lead not to peace, but to a new form of war.

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

**SPLA-IO** Sudanese People's Liberation Army - in Opposition

**SPLM** Sudanese People's Liberation Movement

**SPLM-IO [RM]** Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army – in Opposition [Riek Machar]

**SSLM** South Sudan Liberation Movement

**SSIM/A** South Sudanese Independence Movement/Army

**SSOA** South Sudan Opposition Alliance

**SSPDF** South Sudan People's Defense Force

**SPLM-IG** Sudanese People's Liberation Army – in Government

## Disclaimer

Information provided in this MAAPSS Update is sourced from field research conducted by Small Arms Survey and HSBA experts, including interviews with officials from the SPLM, SSPDF, SPLA-IO, local and state leaders, and other prominent officials both in and outside of South Sudan. Where appropriate, in-text links are provided to access secondary source material and actors' profiles on the MAAPSS website.