

MAAPSS Update

9 February 2021

Appointment of the Governor and Deputy Governor for Upper Nile

On 29 January 2021, South Sudanese President [Salva Kiir](#) issued Republican Decree No. 05/2021, finally appointing the governor of Upper Nile, Budhok Ayang Kur, and shortly thereafter, the deputy governor, James Tor Monybuny.

While the governors of South Sudan's other nine states had been [appointed](#) by 15 July 2020, a stand-off had ensued in Upper Nile. The Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO), which was supposed to select the governor, had nominated [Johnson Olonyi](#), the leader of the Shilluk [Agwelek](#) militia and the SPLA-IO [RM] commander for [Sector I](#). His appointment would have been a red line for the Padang Dinka military and political elite that had waged a successful [campaign against the Agwelek](#) in 2015–18, arrogating control of the west bank of the White Nile and the contested state capital of Malakal. They feared that Olonyi's appointment would give support to Shilluk claims to this land.

In order to keep the Padang Dinka within the government coalition, Kiir refused Olonyi's nomination as governor. [Ateny Wek Ateny](#), Kiir's press secretary, accused Olonyi of being a 'war monger,' while Kiir reportedly pushed [Riek Machar](#) to choose another candidate. Machar, in contrast, worried that nominating someone else for governor would alienate the Agwelek, one of the sole remaining military forces loyal to the SPLA-IO's leadership in Juba, following a wave of desertions that had ensued once Machar [announced his picks](#) for the cabinet of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) in March 2020.

The impasse in Upper Nile dragged on through the rest of the year. In December 2020, Kiir announced that there would be a

conference in Juba for all the communities of Upper Nile, after which a final decision would be made on the new governor. The conference was to be stage-managed by Kiir's regime and designed to get Olonyi to come to Juba. Olonyi refused to go, wary of the possibility of arrest or detention in the capital. In 2015, when Olonyi was still aligned with the government, and shortly after the assassination of his deputy—James Bwogo—by Padang Dinka militias, there were repeated calls for him to go to Juba, in what was a transparent attempt to separate him from his military forces and enable his arrest; Olonyi resisted these calls in 2015, and also refused to go to Juba in 2020, for the same reasons.

With the failure of the conference gambit, Kiir's pressure on Machar rose at the beginning of 2021, leading to Machar issuing an ultimatum to Olonyi by phone in the week beginning 25 January: either come to Juba or the SPLA-IO [RM] will pick someone else as governor of Upper Nile.

Following Olonyi's reiterated refusal to go to the capital, Machar moved forward with selecting another nominee for governor. Machar didn't put his nomination to the SPLA-IO National Liberation Council (NLC), but rather conferred with a coterie of trusted advisors and family members, as has been his habit since the opposition's return to Juba, a habit, moreover, reflective of Machar's weakened position in South Sudan: dependent on Kiir's largesse, Machar is almost as little a leader today as [Taban Deng Gai](#) was in 2016, following Machar's flight from Juba at the end of the ARCSS. Machar's side-lining of the NLC intensified scepticism about his choice within the SPLA-IO.

His choice for governor of Upper Nile, [Budhok Ayang Kur](#), continues Machar's

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tendency in 2020, to make political appointments from within a narrow circle of family members and advisors: Budhok is from Kodok, the same town as Machar's wife, the Minister of Defence, [Angelina Teny](#), and they are cousins.

The son of the former *Reth* (king) of the Shilluk (Ayang Anai Kur, 1974-1992), Budhok grew up in an elite political family. During the second civil war in Sudan, he served first as commissioner for Kodok, and then in National Security in Khartoum, where he had occasion to form connections with many of the National Congress Party (NCP) figures that now play a central role in Kiir's regime. With the end of the second civil war, and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Budhok served as a state minister in Malakal. Since the beginning of the current civil war, Budhok has been loyal to Olonyi. Like Jokino Fidele, Olonyi's former right-hand man and the former SPLA-IO [RM] governor of Fashoda state, Budhok is a political figure, without any military support of his own on the ground. While Jokino Fidele switched sides, joining the government, Budhok has been an important political advisor for Olonyi over the last two years, as one of the SPLA-IO [RM]'s delegated members to the Technical Boundary Committee of the Independent Boundaries Commission, and as one of Olonyi's representatives negotiating with Machar and Kiir in Juba in 2020–21.

Budhok, in Juba at the beginning of February 2021, will return to Malakal only with Machar, after the government formalizes all state-level and county level appointments in the country – something the government claims it will do by February 15. For the Agwelek and Olonyi, the danger is that Budhok will be a Potemkin figure, powerless within a Padang Dinka administration that controls land rights in Malakal, and that Olonyi will be once again deserted by a political figure in whom he trusts—like Fidele before

him—as Budhok sells out to the government.

As of 9 February 2021, the Agwelek have not made an official statement. There is widespread anger about Machar's choice of Budhok, which was not approved by Olonyi and the Agwelek, and is considered a rebuff not just to Olonyi but also to [Simon Gatwich Dual](#), the Chief of General Staff of SPLA-IO [RM]. In mid-January, Olonyi conferred with Dual, who is currently in Megenis, on the Sudan-South Sudan border, next to Upper Nile, and it was agreed that neither man should go to Juba. Both men rejected the possibility of another nominee for the post of governor of Upper Nile. Dual and Olonyi have conferred before; both feel alienated by Machar's leadership and his concentration on the enrichment of his family and friends at the cost of the SPLA-IO [RM] as an organization; both have evaluated before—in 2015 and again in 2018—whether the time was right to split from the SPLA-IO [RM] and create a new group.

While the forces of the two men constitute the most important military parts of the SPLA-IO [RM], a new alliance will do nothing to change the calculus on the ground: the government coalition achieved an overwhelming military victory by 2018, and there is no regional appetite to supply a new rebellion in South Sudan. Both Dual and Olonyi are cognisant of the history of commanders who, upon leaving the SPLA-IO [RM], have found themselves consigned to the pile of history, far from the riches of Juba and the emoluments of the peace agreements. Neither man wishes to suffer the fate of Gatdet or Tanginye, commanders who broke away from the SPLA-IO earlier in the war, only to find themselves remote from power, and without the means to mobilize significant support.

According to figures close to both men, their approach—for now—is likely to be cautious. For the Agwelek, in particular,

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any reaction to Budhok's appointment will wait until it becomes clear how much power he will have, and whether he has entirely sold out to the government. The selections of state and county-level positions will be watched keenly, as a barometer of Budhok's power, and the choice of Malakal county commissioner, in particular, is likely to be highly contentious. According to the agreement between the signatories of the R-ARCSS, the Other Opposition Parties alliance will nominate a commissioner for Malakal, SSOA for Panyikang, and the SPLM for Fashoda.

The appointment of [James Tor Monybuny](#) as the deputy governor, however, is unlikely to assuage Agwelek concerns. While in theory the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) should have selected the candidate for the position, it was instead a government appointment, and of a familiar face: James Tor Monybuny was the governor of Central Upper Nile state in 2017–19.

A former Presbyterian pastor from the Ngok Lual Yak subsection of the Padang Dinka, Monybuny owes his loyalties to his kinsman from Baliet County, [Chol Thon Balok](#), the controversial former acting governor of Eastern Nile responsible for the wholesale displacement of the Shilluk from the east bank of the White Nile, and now the deputy chief of staff for the SSPDF. Monybuny became governor of Central Upper Nile after Kiir's 32-states declaration, as a way to take the heat off Chol Thon: he continued, however, with Chol Thon's agenda, using administrative power to consecrate the Padang power grab in Upper Nile.

If other state-level appointments follow the trend of Monybuny's appointment, it is possible that the Agwelek will feel forced to act militarily against the new administration in Upper Nile, regardless of whether such actions would be successful.

However, a more likely consequence of the appointment of Budhok and Monybuny is the total exasperation of the Shilluk population with Riek Machar and the SPLA-IO [RM], and this feeling may, conversely, drive some Shilluk into the hands of the SPLM. Over the last few years, Kiir's regime has proved expert in exploiting weaknesses and divisions in the SPLA-IO [RM], including most notably in Maiwut county, Upper Nile, and in the raft of defections from the opposition in March–April 2020. Machar's appointment of Budhok may play into the government's hands in this sense. While Panyikang county and the south of the west bank of the White Nile remains firmly loyal to Olonyi, Kodok—Budhok's birthplace—has already been the site of government-backed Shilluk resistance to Olonyi, and in the north of the Shilluk kingdom that resistance to Olonyi is likely to come. Kiir understands this, and has backed a politician from Kodok: [Onyoti Adigo Nyikwec](#), the minister of Animal Resources and Fisheries in the R-TGoNU and the highest placed Shilluk in the government. Other figures, including Jokino Fidele and William Othon—former governor of Fashoda—also wait in the wings in Juba for a chance at power.

Thus, while Budhok's appointment, in the short term, represents success for Machar and his increasingly narrow circle of supporters, in the long term, it may provide further opportunities for the government to divide the opposition, and fragment Machar's powerbase. Already, on 31 January 2021, a collection of Lou Nuer SPLA-IO [RM] figures, including James [Jamuth Yuot Dak](#), the former commissioner of Akobo East, announced they were leaving the SPLA-IO [RM], accusing Machar of side-lining the Lou Nuer. While members of SPLA-IO [RM] in Juba wave this away as the complaints of those out-of-power, taking advantage of Budhok's appointment, the crisis in the opposition is real.

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Machar's capacity to survive in Juba relied on his tacit agreement with Kiir: the SPLM-IO is now effectively SPLM-IG. But Machar's continual willingness to alienate the broader opposition in order to ingratiate himself with Kiir's regime has a limit: the more he alienates his commanders, the less value he has for Kiir, and thus Machar's attempt to keep power may be the one sure-fire way he has of losing it.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARCSS Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan

NCP National Congress Party

NLC National Liberation Council

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

R-TGoNU Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity

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]

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.