

# SITUATION UPDATE

June 2024



## Dominance without Legitimacy: Tong Akeen Ngor's Reign in Northern Bahr el Ghazal State

### KEY FINDINGS

- Tong Akeen Ngor, the governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal state, has consolidated his grip on power by buying support, detaining members of the opposition, and ingratiating himself with South Sudanese President Salva Kiir. Tensions have emerged between Tong Akeen and his patron, Vice-President Hussein Abdel Bagi.
- The war in Sudan has transformed the political economy of Northern Bahr el Ghazal. Goods—including petrol destined for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—now come to the border from Juba, rather than Khartoum, while looted vehicles and other material flow south to militarized markets, which allow the state's elite to profit from the devastation of the conflict.
- Since November 2023, the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) has recruited more than 3,000 troops in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, in violation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS).
- Paul Malong Awan, the former governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal and the leader of the South Sudan United Front/Army (SSUF/A), is participating in talks in Nairobi, Kenya. He is apparently willing to join the transitional government, but there are significant voices in Juba that do not wish him to return.

## Context

During the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005), a military elite emerged in Northern Bahr el Ghazal that used the dislocations of the conflict to control flows of labour and goods. Displacement and recruitment became means of exercising coercive force over the population (Craze, 2018). The Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA)—under the command of Malong, with the current SSPDF chief of defence forces, Santino Deng Wol, as his deputy from 1994—instrumentalized *gelweng* cattleguards as auxiliary forces and built a war-time administration in the east of the state (Boswell, 2019). Meanwhile, *murahaleen* militias, recruited from Baggara cattleguards in Kordofan and Darfur, fought a counter-insurgency for Khartoum, razing fields, poisoning water wells, and directly creating the conditions that led to a famine in Bahr el Ghazal from 1986 to 1988 (Keen, 2008).

Malong’s influence has diminished. The current power brokers in Northern Bahr el Ghazal instead stem from the very forces that inflicted such horrific damage on the state in the 1980s and 1990s. Abdel Bagi, one of Kiir’s five vice-presidents, is the son of a powerful chief, Abdel Bagi Ayii Akol, who spent much of his life in South Darfur, recruiting militias backed by the Sudanese government during the second civil war (RVI, 2020a). Ayii Akol established connections with Misseriya and Rizeigat pastoralist groups in Kordofan and with Sudanese security elites in Khartoum, which enabled him to build a trading empire on the borders of southern Sudan.<sup>1</sup> The wealth of Northern Bahr el Ghazal’s elite families can be traced to this period, and stems directly from the immiseration of the population (Kindersley and Majok, 2019).

Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, Malong—who would serve as the governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal from 2008 to 2014—quickly became the most powerful figure in the state, assisted by an oil-soaked expansion of

the security sector payroll (Craze, 2020). Many of the people displaced by the famines and conflicts of the 1980s–90s returned to a transformed Northern Bahr el Ghazal, increasingly dependent on markets and money (Thomas, 2020). Such precarity forced youthful populations into labour migration, or conscription by the security services (Kindersley and Majok, 2020). In response to border disputes with Sudan in the 14-Mile Area (2010–12) and Hejlj (2012), Malong—alongside Deng Wol, now the head of SPLA Division 3—recruited the Mathiang Anyoor, a mono-ethnic Dinka militia.<sup>2</sup> As the South Sudanese political compact fell apart in December 2013, the Mathiang Anyoor functioned as shock troops for Kiir’s regime under the control of the new SPLA chief of staff—Malong.

Malong’s ascendancy in South Sudan was undermined by Kiir’s fear that he would launch a coup. By 2017, Malong had been removed. He went into exile in Nairobi and began his own rebel group—the SSUF/A. Kiir subsequently co-opted Malong’s lieutenants and marginalized his allies. His successful dismissal of Malong was enabled by a regional rapprochement that saw the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) ally itself with its erstwhile enemies in Khartoum.

This realignment is exemplified by the imbroglio around the selection of South Sudan’s fifth vice-president. After the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, five vice-presidents were to be selected by their respective parties, but the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) failed to agree on a candidate. Kiir, together with Abdel Fattah al-Burhan—then the chairperson of Sudan’s Transitional Military Council and leader of the Sudan Armed Forces—interceded and chose Abdel Bagi, the secretary-general of the South Sudan Patriotic Movement/Army (SSPM/A), which was a continuation of the militia formed by the Abdel Bagi family during the second civil war. Abdel Bagi’s elevation to vice-president strengthened ties between Juba and Khartoum.

Abdel Bagi, though a member of the SSOA, played a key role in the appointment of Tong Akeen as the

<sup>1</sup> This Situation Update will refer to ‘South Sudan’ as the nation-state created on 9 July 2011, following the secession of southern Sudan from Sudan, and to ‘southern Sudan’ as the area roughly proximate to the nation-state of South Sudan prior to its declaration of independence.

<sup>2</sup> For details on these border disputes, see Small Arms Survey (2012; 2014).

SPLM governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal (RVI, 2020b). Tong Akeen had worked as an intelligence officer for the National Congress Party (NCP) of Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir during the second civil war and, like Abdel Bagi, had strong ties to the Sudanese security establishment. Despite these similarities, the two men are not particularly close. Abdel Bagi selected Tong Akeen because he was a relatively weak candidate with little popular support, who the vice-president felt could be easily controlled. As elsewhere in South Sudan, the formal architecture of the R-ARCSS has promoted the appointments of putatively weak gubernatorial candidates that the Juba-based elite believes it can easily dominate (Craze and Markó, 2022).

From 2020 to 2023, Kiir endeavoured to keep Abdel Bagi close as a means of maintaining control of the borderlands. With the outbreak of the current Sudanese civil war in April 2023, Abdel Bagi's importance lessened and Tong Akeen began to assert his independence. In the run-up to South Sudan's elections scheduled for December 2024, Tong Akeen has been conducting rallies, detaining opposition politicians, and securing his position against a possible challenge from Abdel Bagi.<sup>3</sup>

## Tong Akeen's reign

Tong Akeen has expertly exploited the R-ARCSS to control Northern Bahr el Ghazal. Shortly before the formation of the state cabinet in 2020, he appointed executive directors for all the ministries that would be allocated to opposition groups. This weakened the opposition's ability to control state ministries. Instead, opposition politicians were forced to choose between cooperating with Tong Akeen or finding themselves in a political wilderness. Opposition figures that try to carve out their own spheres of influence are liable to be dismissed, thanks to Tong Akeen's influence in Juba. In January 2024, for instance, Kiir relieved two Sudan People's Liberation

Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) ministers of their posts—both of whom had been vocal about corruption in Northern Bahr el Ghazal—and replaced them with more pliable candidates.<sup>4</sup>

Tong Akeen, who hails from a minor Malual Dinka clan, lacks popularity.<sup>5</sup> The state has traditionally been an SPLM stronghold, and he is seen as an NCP interloper from the north. In the 2010 elections, Tong Akeen stood as an NCP candidate for parliament; he failed not only to win his seat, but even to obtain the endorsement of the customary authorities of his own village. Like other governors in South Sudan (Small Arms Survey, 2023a; Pospisil, 2023), Tong Akeen has circumvented his acute lack of local legitimacy by building elite coalitions, arresting or killing dissenters, and using his financial control of the lucrative border trade to purchase loyalty.

Since becoming governor in 2020, Tong Akeen has allocated government sinecures to extend his political coalition. In March 2024, Tong Akeen made a number of appointments across state ministries. For instance, the key position of the director-general of the revenue authority was given to William Kur Makur—his cousin and a relative of Madut Biar Yel, the current national minister of telecommunications. Makur is also the SPLM youth chairperson for Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and was appointed with a view to the forthcoming elections. Diing Aher Ngong was made the commissioner of Aweil East—Northern Bahr el Ghazal's most populous and politically important county. During the 2010 elections, Aher had harassed opposition members for the SPLM, and was likely recruited to perform the same job in December 2024.

Other crucial supporters of Tong Akeen include Stephen Ayaga, the SPLM secretary-general for the state, who had significant influence in Aweil Centre county, and Joseph Akok, a former member of the Sudanese paramilitary Popular Defence Forces (PDF), who functions as Tong Akeen's enforcer.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with informants in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state, January–May 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Riek Machar's position in Juba, which is dependent on Kiir's largesse, means that he is helpless to resist the president's decisions about SPLM-IO ministerial appointments at the state level.

<sup>5</sup> The Malual Dinka constitute the overwhelming majority of the population of Northern Bahr el Ghazal.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the PDF, see Salmon (2007).

governor's cousin, Andrea Lual Buola, is the state minister of finance, and has been accused by the anti-corruption commission in Northern Bahr el Ghazal of diverting state resources; the head of the commission was subsequently detained for making these accusations (Hawari, 2022; Radio Tamazuj, 2022). Tong Akeen has also built an alliance with the family of the late Gen. James Ajongo, who replaced Malong as the head of the SPLA and hailed from the most prominent Luo family in the state. It is through such alliance-building that Tong Akeen has consolidated control of Northern Bahr el Ghazal.

Most importantly, Tong Akeen has formed strong connections with the elite in Juba. In 2022, Tong Akeen signed a deal with African Resources Corporation (ARC), which permitted Wunkoc Engineering and Modern Contractors (ARC's subcontracted partner) to level Awoda mountain in Aweil Centre county, and use the quarried stone to build Akhon International Airport in Kiir's home village. ARC is owned by Benjamin Bol Mel, the Senior Presidential Envoy on Special Programs and the head of several US-sanctioned businesses involved in diverting oil funds and other state revenues (Craze, 2023). In return, Aweil Centre was promised a school, a health facility, and a borehole. As of May 2024, none of these development projects had been delivered. As a result, local protests blocked Wunkoc's access to the quarry at Awoda. These protests have been defused, at least temporarily, but the saga indicates that for politicians like Tong Akeen, ingratiating oneself with Juba's elite is more of a political priority than local accountability.

Tong Akeen has nevertheless also attempted to purchase popularity in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. Prior to the outbreak of war in Sudan in 2023, he travelled to Khartoum each year to purchase grain that would be sold cheaply to poor families during the lean season. For Kiir's presidential endorsement by the greater Bahr el Ghazal region, which took place in Wau in July 2023 (Small Arms Survey, 2023b), Tong Akeen mobilized approximately 10,000 people with the promise of incentives, such as cash, food, and accommodation. Rather than taking the direct road to Wau, the convoy passed

through Akhon, next to the site of the new airport, in a display of support for the president. Such is Tong Akeen's distribution of largesse that a new brand of biscuit, supposedly sufficient to keep one satiated for an entire day, has recently been nicknamed the 'Tong Akeen'. The governor is simply the owner of the biggest biscuit in town.

## The opposition vanishes

Those that Tong Akeen cannot buy off with cash or positions are arrested or made to disappear. Since Malong's dismissal in 2017, Kiir's regime and Tong Akeen have been working to remove the rebel general's supporters, along with other influential members of the opposition, from positions of influence in the state. In September and October 2022, more than 40 people were arrested in a joint operation by the National Security Services (NSS) and SSPDF Military Intelligence. Many were taken to Juba, where those detained without charge in Blue House, the famed national security detention centre (HRW, 2020), included Samuel Garang Dut, a civil society activist, and Deng Makol, the chairperson of the state's trade union association.

The state government's campaign to eliminate opponents has continued into 2024. On 31 January, the SPLM youth league leader for Aweil North county, Peter Loc Yak, disappeared on his way from Aweil to Gok Machar.<sup>7</sup> Before his disappearance, Loc had angered Joseph Akok (otherwise known as Akok Manyiel), Tong Akeen's powerful security adviser, by backing a rival politician from their home payam. On 12 February, the secretary-general of the state's youth union, Wilson Unam Bol, was arrested on charges of embezzlement (Aweil News Agency, 2024). It is more likely, however, that Bol was arrested because of his links to Tito Awen, the union's former chairperson, who was removed by Tong Akeen in 2023.

One of Tong Akeen's goals is to prevent any viable opposition blocs from emerging in the state. In this he has been successful. Other than the SPLM, no

<sup>7</sup> Interviews with informants in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, February–March 2024.

party has a meaningful support base within Northern Bahr el Ghazal. Those who joined the SPLM-IO did so opportunistically, in order to take advantage of the positions offered by the terms of the R-ARCSS. The SSOA lacks any grassroots structures in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and the SSPM is effectively an elite alliance forged between two families: that of Abdel Bagi (Aweil East county), including his brother Nuradin Garang (the SSPDF head of procurement), and that of Riiny Lual (Aweil West county). Lual and Abdel Bagi *père* both served together in Khartoum. Their children run the SSPM: Mabior Riiny Lual is currently the secretary-general of the movement, and Costello Garang, his brother, is its chair. Rather than attempt to build a viable grassroots organization, the SSPM has attempted to control the SPLM from the outside.

The most serious threat to Tong Akeen's control of the state may emerge from Abdel Bagi. If elections do occur, Kiir will only have one vice-presidential nomination, which will mean finding space for the five current vice-presidents within the South Sudanese political system. In Juba, one mooted possibility is that Abdel Bagi could become the governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal. Within the state, this would be a deeply unpopular choice: Abdel Bagi has never been forgiven for his militia forces' vicious assaults on Northern Bahr el Ghazal during the second civil war. His nomination, if it occurred, would continue a trend whereby governors with links to Sudan's security establishment are imposed on the border states, and local legitimacy is sacrificed to regional political dynamics. Tensions have already emerged between Tong Akeen and his patron. In January 2024, Tong Akeen fired Mangar Mou Anyar, the SPLM chairperson for Aweil East county, amid claims he supported the SSOA. The move suggests a growing rift between the two men.

## The return of King Paul?

In late 2023, Kiir informed the Community of Sant' Egidio, which had been hosting talks in Rome between the South Sudanese government and rebel

groups not party to the R-ARCSS, that negotiations would move to Nairobi, and take place under the auspices of Kenyan President William Ruto. On 17 May 2024, the talks led to a nebulous 'commitment declaration' for peace (Memo, 2024). Among the many unanswered questions left by this declaration is whether Malong and his SSUF/A would return to South Sudan.

Malong's strength on the ground is not what it was. Following his rebellion in 2017, many of the supporters of the man popularly known as 'King Paul' were arrested. Some of his closest supporters—including Kuol Athuai (the former commissioner for Aweil North county) and Manut Yel (Malong's manager of the Warawa/Majok Yithau border point)—fled to Meiram in East Darfur, and established an operations post. In June 2019, Kiir visited Khartoum to obtain northern approval for an operation against Malong's men. By August 2019, Sudanese government forces had flushed the SSUF/A out of Meiram and into South Sudan. The SSUF/A attempted to reach a cantonment site at Pantit, but Manut Yel was killed and Athuai injured during clashes with the SSPDF (RVI, 2019). Malong now has almost no military forces under his command.

Politically, Malong's supporters have largely been absorbed into the government coalition. His closest lieutenants, Santino Deng Wol and Madut Yel, are now the chief of defence forces and the ambassador to Egypt, respectively. Lesser figures have also been given choice sinecures. Joseph Akok, Tong Akeen's security adviser, for example, once swore fealty to Malong. Other supporters were arrested.<sup>8</sup> Such is the rigour with which Malong's supporters have been suppressed or bought off that it is hard to gauge the popularity of the rebel general in the state. What is clear is that Malong retains far more local legitimacy than the former NCP politicians currently dominating the state.

Northern Bahr el Ghazal's elite is unified against the prospect of Malong's return. The principal opposition comes from three of the major families in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. In Aweil East county,

8 Interviews with informants in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, February–March 2024.

opposition is led by the family of Abdel Bagi and that of Akuei Ajou. The latter includes the veteran politician Aldo Ajou, along with Deng Deng Akuei, the former governor of then Aweil East state (2015–20). In Aweil West county, Malong's return is opposed by Riiny Lual's family. Unlike in Warrap state (Craze, 2022), where political conflict often emerges between communities, the politics of Northern Bahr el Ghazal is contested between the elite families that emerged as a 'military aristocracy' during the second civil war (Pinaud, 2014). All these families fear that Malong's return would threaten their domination of the state.

State-level concerns are less important to Kiir than national priorities. The more decisive opposition to Malong's return is likely to be from Akol Koor Kuc, the director-general of the NSS, who was instrumental in the rebel general's ousting in 2017. The director-general would resist the return of Malong, who harbours a deep enmity against him. Malong's return, if it is indeed negotiated in Nairobi, would send shockwaves through Juba, and represent an attempt by Kiir to rebalance his coalition—with an empowered Malong intended to block Akol Koor, Hussein Abdel Bagi, and the other former NCP security figures that have, until now, proved critical to Kiir's political calculus.

## Profiting from conflict

Northern Bahr el Ghazal's economy has capsized. Once a major importer of goods from Sudan, the state has seen its food supply from Darfur reduced to a trickle, while the influx of people fleeing south has pushed up commodity prices throughout the state (Majok, 2024). Some, though, have profited from the disarray. South Sudanese traders now bring commodities from Juba and sell them to Sudanese customers, in a reversal of customary trade flows. Fuel has become another lucrative market—the best customer being the RSF, installed at Raiq Mandalla, some ten kilometres north of Kiir Adem. While the state government formally banned the export of fuel to Sudan in November 2023, this has made little difference to its current trade: the RSF is desperate

for petrol, and the traders for dollars. Flowing south, alongside the refugees, is war loot, including sheet metal, and a flourishing trade in stolen cars destined for Juba.

All these goods flow into a militarized border economy. Kiir Adem now marks a smuggling frontier, with the SSPDF on one side, and the RSF on the other. The trade in fuel and looted goods has proved profitable to the Northern Bahr el Ghazal state government, which taxes the proceeds. This enrichment consolidates already strong ties between the Abdel Bagi family and the RSF. In November 2020, Abdel Bagi personally delivered USD 690,000 to the leader of the RSF, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo (known as 'Hemeti'), in payment for the deaths of Sudanese Misseriya killed during clashes in May and June of that year (RVI, 2020b). Tong Akeen has publicly remained neutral in the war, but both his security adviser, Joseph Akok, and his economic adviser, Nyuol Arop, have expressed support for the RSF.<sup>9</sup> These ties reflect a history of connection between the RSF forces in East Darfur—which have long controlled the northern side of the border—and the political elite of Northern Bahr el Ghazal.

## The growing army

The continuing collapse of the South Sudanese economy, coupled with the growing number of people who have fled the war in Sudan, has deepened the labour crisis in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, creating a surplus class of young women and men that cannot be absorbed by the state's economy. With labour migration to Sudan curtailed by the war, conscription has once again become one of the few ways to sustain a livelihood in an increasingly monetized, market-based economy. Under the terms of the R-ARCSS, the South Sudanese government committed to refrain from conscripting new soldiers. It has repeatedly violated these terms, including during NSS recruitment campaigns in Warrap in 2021, and in the creation of an entirely new division (Division 11), commanded by Santino Deng Wol and mono-ethnically Dinka (Craze, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with informants in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, February–March 2024.

Further recruitment has occurred in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. As first reported in November 2023, the SSPDF trained 3,018 recruits in September–December 2023, at the Mathiang military garrison in Aweil and at Division Three’s base in Wunyiik (Sudans Post, 2023). An estimated 573 recruits were also trained at the Mathiang facility in 2024—these recruits are said to be joining the state police force, which the South Sudanese government is building up as an alternative security force to the NSS. The Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism confirmed this recruitment in May 2024 (Sudans Post, 2024). Those initially trained in Mathiang were then transported to Mapel, Western Bahr el Ghazal, for future deployment. Just as during the recruitment of the Mathiang Anyoor, the SSPDF has claimed that this recruitment is merely a series of refresher courses for extant officers, a claim belied by the facts. At a funeral service in Aweil in January 2024, Tong Akeen called on the young people of the state to join the army and the police force.<sup>10</sup> These forces will constitute a mono-ethnic Dinka force, recruited entirely outside the bounds of the peace agreement.

## Conclusion

While diplomatic attention focuses on the December election, in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, some think the party in charge of the state has already changed from the SPLM to the NCP. As one young Malual Dinka man interviewed for this Situation Update reflected, ‘I sometimes wonder why we fought for so long, only to be ruled by the very people we fought against’.<sup>11</sup> In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, the NCP-backed leaders that ran the militias that displaced tens of thousands during the second Sudanese civil war have entrenched their control of the state, exploiting the precarity of the economy to conscript and exploit its labour force, while profiting from the devastation of the Sudanese civil war.

It is commonly said that Northern Bahr el Ghazal is a one-party state, dominated by the SPLM, without

meaningful opposition candidates. The situation is graver than that: it is a no-party state. An elite, allied to Sudanese security elites to the north and Kiir’s regime to the south, switches its party colours at will, exploiting South Sudan’s formal political architecture, to maximize its control of lucrative border trade. This elite’s roots lie in the NCP, and current political winds will see it take up the red banner of the SPLM. December’s election is another opportunity for this elite to further consolidate power. Changing these dynamics would be a long-term process, and would involve empowering the young women and men of Northern Bahr el Ghazal, who desperately want a chance to determine their own future. ●

## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>ARC</b>	African Resources Corporation
<b>NCP</b>	National Congress Party
<b>NSS</b>	National Security Services
<b>PDF</b>	Popular Defence Forces
<b>RSF</b>	Rapid Support Forces
<b>R-ARCSS</b>	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Army
<b>SPLM</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement
<b>SPLM-IO</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
<b>SSOA</b>	South Sudan Opposition Alliance
<b>SSPDF</b>	South Sudan People’s Defence Forces
<b>SSPM/A</b>	South Sudan Patriotic Movement/Army
<b>SSUF/A</b>	South Sudan United Front/Army

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with informants in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, February–March 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Telephone interview with a Malual Dinka informant, name withheld, January 2024.

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**Project coordinator:** Khristopher Carlson

**Production coordinators:** Olivia Denonville and Katie Lazaro

**Editor:** Khristopher Carlson

**Copy-editor:** Alessandra Allen

**Design:** Julian Knott

**Layout:** Rick Jones

**Proofreader:** Stephanie Huitson



### Contact details

Small Arms Survey, Maison de la Paix, Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2E, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

**t** +41 22 908 5777, **e** [info@smallarmssurvey.org](mailto:info@smallarmssurvey.org)

[www.smallarmssurvey.org](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org)