

SITUATION UPDATE

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Wun Weng's Victory: The Rise and Fall of Benjamin Bol Mel

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KEY FINDINGS

- Benjamin Bol Mel was fired after a rift emerged between him and Salva Kiir's family, following his bid to consolidate control of the president's office.
- Bol Mel had played a key role in transferring state funds into the pockets of Kiir's family, gaining their support. Business disputes between him and Adut Salva, Kiir's daughter, who became concerned about his desire for the presidency, precipitated his downfall.
- Bol Mel has gone the way of a series of Kiir's previous rivals. In each case, Kiir built up potential contenders for the throne until they revealed their ambitions, at which point they were ruthlessly removed.
- Kiir himself has shown no interest in succession. He remains intent on leading South Sudan into elections postulated for 2026. A succession will nonetheless occur, and likely augur a chaotic period of repeated changes at the top. Kiir has intentionally created a system predicated on eroding the political legitimacy of both the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the political elite. There is no one in the country able to succeed him.

Context

In September 2024, after Kiir postponed national elections, political debate in Juba turned to the question of succession (Craze, 2025). Now 74 and in poor health, Kiir has ruled for 20 years. In October 2024, he removed many of his rivals, such as Akol Koor Kuc, the head of the Internal Security Bureau (ISB) of the National Security Service (NSS), and Lual Wek Gem, the head of the presidential guard. The purge later extended to firmaments in Kiir's coalition, including Tut Kew Gatluak, his Bul Nuer security advisor; James Wani Igga, the vice-president of the Economics Cluster; and SPLM heavyweights Kuol Manyang and Awet Akol, with nary a word of complaint.¹ The March 2025 arrest of the first vice-president, Riek Machar, seemingly marked the final act in Kiir's clear-out.

In Juba, many diplomats concluded that the cull was designed to pave the way for Bol Mel's succession. Sanctioned by the United States since 2017, Bol Mel is a businessman from Northern Bahr el Ghazal with close ties to Kiir's family, who helped funnel petrodollars off-book and into the president's pockets (Craze, 2023). His political ascent was meteoric. It culminated in his appointment as vice-president of the Economics Cluster in February 2025, and as first deputy chairperson of the SPLM in May.

Bol Mel's fall from grace was even quicker. Almost from the moment he was spoken of as a future president, rumours spread of a rupture between the businessman and Kiir's family, centred on disputes between him and Adut Salva, Kiir's daughter. Tensions over the arrest of Akot Lual Arech, a relative of Kiir and his former private secretary, spiralled into a struggle between Bol Mel and Kiir's family for control of the presidential guard. The winner was Adut—whose nickname is Wun Weng, which means the owner of a cow. In the run-up to Bol Mel's exit, most of his allies were fired. Then, on 12 November, Bol Mel himself was stripped of his titles and dismissed. He was taken to Blue House, the NSS detention facility, before being confined to house arrest.

The conviction, held by many international diplomats, that Bol Mel was Kiir's heir apparent reflected their own desire to imagine a Kiir-less world rather than the actual dynamics of South Sudanese politics. Kiir has never chosen a successor and is aware that naming one would invite his rivals to plot against him. Kiir's *modus operandi* is to build up contenders until they reveal their ambitions, at which point they are removed.² Bol Mel went the way of Paul Malong Awan, Nhial Deng Nhial, and Akol Koor Kuc—all thought indispensable, and all dismissed with minimal fuss.

Many were delighted with Bol Mel's exit. The SPLM old guard saw him as 'jumping the queue', given that he had not fought in Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005), and critiqued him for engaging in a level of corruption that exceeded even the SPLM's post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement excesses (2005–11). Bol Mel has none of Kiir's legitimacy.

Debates over the viability of his leadership touch on broader issues in South Sudanese politics (Pospisil, 2025). The generals who led South Sudan to independence are now in their 70s. Bol Mel was born in 1978. Was he, as some diplomats tentatively suggested, the rising star of a new generation, unsullied by the political struggles of the second Sudanese civil war? Or was he a figure who enriched himself using the same corrupt system employed by older leaders (UNHRC, 2025)?

Even if Bol Mel had come to power, it is unlikely he would have lasted long. For 20 years, Kiir has fractured the political elite, setting them against each other while pushing out rivals and appointing weak political apparatchiks to important positions (Craze and Markó, 2022). Kiir has created a system in which he is the necessary mediator between rival, shifting coalitions. Without him, and the political legitimacy he draws from decades in power, the system is likely to fall apart.

For some, talk of succession is foolish. One Juba-based politician speculated that '[Kiir] has no

¹ On 3 November, Kiir reappointed Tut Kew as his security advisor (discussed below).

² See Craze (2022, pp. 33–38) for an analysis of this strategy in relation to Nhial Deng Nhial.

intention of handing over power. He wishes to take the country to elections in 2026.³ Kiir's frenetic rotation of officials and his use of disorder as a political instrument suggest that long-term succession plans do not make sense in South Sudanese politics, which unfolds week by week and is driven by tactical improvisation. Bol Mel's rise and fall offers a window into the country's turbulent politics. Much of the diplomatic discussion about him is based on rumour and conjecture. This Situation Update assesses Bol Mel's rise and fall within the context of his past in order to illuminate South Sudan's likely future struggles.

Son of a spear master

Bol Mel was born in Rialdit, in the Ajuong chieftaincy of the Abiem section of the Malual Dinka, in Aweil East county. He is from the Patek—one of the largest and most prominent *beny bith* clans in Northern Bahr el Ghazal⁴—specifically the Akol subsection, which is the wealthiest part of the Patek. Rialdit's location shielded it from northern raids during the second Sudanese civil war, allowing residents to move their cattle to Warrap during the worst of the attacks.

His father, Mel Kuol, was a *beny bith* and a wealthy customary chief who fought alongside Kiir during the first Sudanese civil war (1955–72). Bol Mel's mother, from the Pamiaath clan of Malual Khon in Aweil East, also hails from a family of customary chiefs.

In 1987, Bol Mel left Northern Bahr el Ghazal for Ethiopia to join the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). According to sources close to Bol Mel, his father urged him to seek out Kiir to ask him to support his education.⁵ After military training in Ethiopia, Bol Mel met Kiir. He mentioned his father's friendship with the future president, and received backing to study in Uganda with church sponsorship. Bol Mel spent the rest of the war in school, first in Gulu, northern Uganda, and then at the Apostle of Jesus

Minor Seminary in Moroto. He completed his A-levels at St Paul's College in Mbale (2000), and obtained a BA in International Business Administration from United States International University-Africa (2004). He later obtained a master's (2011) and a PhD (2016) from the same institution.

Marriage games

Many rumours about Bol Mel concern his alleged affair with Adut. While the European Union compound in Juba enjoys salacious rumours about the supposed details of this relationship, there is less interest in his actual marriages. During the second civil war, the SPLM/A elite consolidated power through strategic marriages (Pinaud, 2016), a pattern Bol Mel followed.

His first wife, Achol Ngongdit, is the daughter of Ngong Aher, the executive chief of the Wundiing chieftaincy in Aweil West. The marriage ended acrimoniously. In late 2023, Achol's cousin and Bol Mel's confidante, Diing Aher, orchestrated a reconciliation between them, though Achol had already remarried.

Bol Mel's second wife, Suzan Yar Maker, also comes from a powerful chiefly family: the Machar Ayijong lineage of the Atuot of Yirol, Lakes state. Maker chairs the Bahr el Ghazal Women's Union in Kenya and is related to Charles Ciec Mayor, the director-general of the NSS's ISB, who was one of Bol Mel's political allies.⁶

Yar Manyon, his third wife and an Australian–South Sudanese from the Twic Dinka of Jonglei state, represented Bol Mel at a reception following the funeral of Mel Kuol, as well as at other events, including at Freedom Hall, where she gave away a Land Cruiser to the singer Bro Winner, who had praised Bol Mel in his hit song 'Bol Mel' (Bro Winner, 2025). In September 2025, Kiir appointed Manyon director-general in the Ministry of Health.

3 Author interview with a senior politician, name withheld, Juba, October 2025.

4 The *beny bith*, or masters of the spear, are renowned Dinka spiritual leaders.

5 Author telephone interviews with confidential sources in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, October 2025.

6 That it was Mayor's men who arrested Bol Mel indicates that even family ties have their limits.

Bol Mel's fourth wife, Sarah Peter Nyot Kok, is the daughter of the former Sudanese minister of higher education. In September 2025, she was appointed counsel general in the Ministry of Justice, overseeing the Directorate of Public Prosecution. Shortly after Kok's appointment, Machar was put on trial for treason for his alleged role in the white armies' overrunning of a South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) barracks in Nasir county (Craze, forthcoming). In Juba, it is rumoured that Kok will soon be dismissed.

The empire builder

Bol Mel was part of a group of businessmen who made their fortunes siphoning off government funds during Juba's economic boom (2005–11). In 2006, he partnered with Garang Deng Aguer, a Dinka businessman, also from the Abiem section of the Malual Dinka. Aguer had accumulated wealth during the 1990s, allegedly through embezzlement, and invested in ventures in Uganda, before being appointed governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal (2003–05).⁷ In 2006, Bol Mel became the general manager of Aguer's Alok consortium of companies and mysteriously acquired the land title for a hotel in Juba.⁸ Contentions over this acquisition led to his suspension from Alok.

Bol Mel briefly left business, spending a year with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Rumbek before returning to launch his own ventures—including the Abiem Base Material Company (ABMC), which was soon renamed the Aggregate Building Material Company after he sold shares to a Thai businessman in a deal that also led to an influx of Thai labour and capital.⁹ In 2011, he became the chairperson of the Chamber of Commerce in Juba, an influential bridge between the city's political and business elites.

ABMC's fortunes rose after the company became a conduit for Kiir to launder government funds back to

his family (The Sentry, 2021). It secured lucrative, non-competitive road contracts, though only one of these roads was ever built. In December 2017, the US Treasury imposed sanctions on ABMC for corruption. In 2018, Bol Mel reincorporated ABMC as ARC Resources, without listing his name as a shareholder, but the corruption continued. In March 2019, Kiir's regime awarded ARC a USD 1 billion contract for the Juba–Bor–Malakal road, with at least USD 100 million paid upfront (UNSC, 2020, p. 17).

Bol Mel has been instrumental in the 'oil for roads' programme. Since 2020, Kiir's regime has issued a series of oil-for-roads construction contracts to companies linked to Bol Mel, including ARC and Winners Construction Company, both sanctioned by the United States. ARC has often been the biggest annual recipient of government revenue. By the end of 2024, some USD 2.2 billion had been allocated to it (UNHRC, 2025, p. 57).

There is no detailed reporting on the programme. Funds are directly deposited into the accounts of the contracted companies and almost none of the roads are built. The only completed road, between Juba and Bor, was massively overpriced, suggesting a major diversion of funds. The February 2024 shutdown of the Dar Blend export pipeline further strengthened Bol Mel's position, as Nile Blend oil revenue from South Sudan's other pipeline was almost entirely channelled into the programme (UNHRC, 2025).

Bol Mel rises

After the 2013 civil war began, Kiir sidelined many SPLM heavyweights. The figures close to Kiir, such as Tut Kew Gatluak and Akol Koor Kuc, were never likely to succeed him. Bol Mel was similarly weak but served a different purpose, playing a key role in transferring state funds into the pockets of Kiir's family. In 2021, when Kiir introduced him to a packed crowd in Bor, many were shocked. Bol Mel's

⁷ Author telephone interviews with confidential sources in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, September 2025.

⁸ Author telephone interviews with confidential sources in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, September 2025.

⁹ Author telephone interviews with confidential sources in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, September 2025.

introduction to national politics came as Kiir became concerned about Akol Koor's power, and sought a counterweight with the political ballast necessary to ensure that state funds remained with the president.

Bol Mel's rise was dizzying. In December 2022, Kiir appointed him the special presidential envoy for special programmes, formalizing his control of the oil-for-roads programme. In March 2023, he joined the SPLM's Political Bureau. Bol Mel was also made the SPLM's first deputy secretary general for political affairs and mobilization and joined the National Liberation Council, the SPLM's highest decision-making body.

Developments in 2024 appeared to pave the way for Bol Mel's consecration as Kiir's successor. Many of the officials who opposed him were removed from office. Akol Koor had lobbied to curb the oil-for-roads project, while Lual Wek Gem had clashed with Bol Mel over Kiir's security. Bol Mel's allies were given important positions, consolidating his control of the economy. In October 2024, Kiir appointed Ayuel Ngor Kacgor, an ally from the Chamber of Commerce, as managing director of the Nile Petroleum Corporation (Nilepet). The following month, Kiir removed Africano Mande, the commissioner of the South Sudan Revenue Authority, and replaced him with Simon Akuei Deng, another former subordinate of Bol Mel at the Chamber of Commerce.

By early 2025, with many of Bol Mel's opponents dismissed, the way seemed clear for his final ascent. In January, he was reappointed to the Nilepet board and joined the National Transitional Council. On 10 February, Bol Mel replaced the SPLM stalwart James Wani Igga as vice-president. Igga, along with Kuol Manyang and Awet Akot, who were also removed, acquiesced to their dismissals. Their families were compensated: Atony Kuol Manyang became trade minister; Agum Awet Akot, the under-secretary for youth and sport; and Igga's eldest son, the executive director of the Roads Authority.

Bol Mel's coronation seemed at hand. In May 2025, he was appointed first deputy chairperson of the

SPLM—just one rung below Kiir. Those who opposed him were removed. After Kiir's return from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in July, he fired SSPDF chief of defence forces (CDF) Paul Nang Majok, and replaced him with Dau Aturjong, a Malual Dinka commander more amenable to Bol Mel's stratagems. Nang and Bol Mel's dispute had two likely causes: firstly, Bol Mel's failed push to replace the unit responsible for the protection of 'J1' (the presidential palace)—the Tiger Division—with the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF); and, secondly, Nang's attempt to block corrupt procurement deals funnelling SSPDF contracts through Maror Akol, a Warrap businessman with close links to Bol Mel and Gregory Vasili, the first lady's brother.¹⁰

Kiir's counter-insurgency had underpinned Bol Mel's rise. He cultivated close ties with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's family; funded the political campaigns of Museveni's son, the UPDF CDF, Muhoozi Kainerugaba; and established links with Salim Saleh, Museveni's brother and security advisor. When the UPDF entered South Sudan in March 2025, it seemed to serve as a praetorian guard for Bol Mel's ambitions, contingent on continued payments to those forces. The war allowed Bol Mel to marginalize Riek Machar, a potential rival; rumours in Juba suggest his attempt to position himself as Kiir's successor was partly behind the counter-insurgency against the Nuer white armies and Machar's arrest.

Bol Mel falls

No one could oppose Bol Mel as long as he retained Kiir's support. The SSPDF elite are dependent upon Kiir's largesse, and Bol Mel had found favour with the one group that Kiir cannot dismiss: his family. The group around the first lady, Mary Ayen, her brother, Gregory Vasili, and Kiir's children, notably Adut, forms a coherent lobby that is interested in expanding its economic interests, ranging from SSPDF procurement to gold mining (The Sentry, 2024). Bol Mel, who shared many economic concerns with Gregory and Adut, was thought to be part of this lobby.

¹⁰ Nang was reappointed CDF in October 2025, as part of Bol Mel's subsequent fall from grace. Author interviews with politicians, names withheld, Juba, July and October 2025.

By July 2025, divisions had emerged between ‘the family’ and a group of Juba politicians nicknamed ‘the hijackers’, centred around Bol Mel, whose desire for the presidency worried Adut. In July 2025, Kiir’s family sent an envoy to Uganda to ask Saleh to shift his support to Adut. The meeting was facilitated by members of the Acholi community and involved Salim Saleh and Akot Lual. The trip alarmed Bol Mel, who appealed to Kiir to have Akot Lual arrested. Adut interceded. Shortly after Kiir declared her the special presidential envoy on special programmes on 20 August 2025, Akot Lual was released from jail.

This was only the first skirmish between the family and the hijackers. Bol Mel attempted to move the Tiger Division out of the Giada barracks but without success. He then tried to have the head of the division, Philip Nyuon Nyuon, dismissed. In August, Bol Mel managed to remove Nyuon Nyuon—who was replaced by one of Bol Mel’s allies, Deng Akeen—but after only six hours an internal revolt by the family saw Nyuon Nyuon restored to his position. Some of Bol Mel’s hijackers subsequently found themselves barred from the presidential palace, with Bang Wieu removed as the head of the presidential protection unit and Mawien Garang dismissed as the president’s personal assistant. The skirmishes continued into October, when Nyuon Nyuon was finally dismissed and replaced by Valentino Baak Makuei.

With Kiir’s family firmly set against Bol Mel, his allies began to be removed from power. On 3 November, Nyuon Nyuon was once again reinstated as the commander of Tiger Division. Kiir also dismissed Madut Dut Yel, a Bol Mel ally, as his security advisor, and brought back Tut Kew Gatluak, partly to limit Bol Mel’s influence. Other Bol Mel allies were fired, and some of his opponents restored to important positions. Africano Mande was appointed as minister of presidential affairs, following the dismissal of Chol Ajongo Mawut.¹¹ Bol Mel’s voice in

Kiir’s bureau, Rita Kiden Lotua, the presidential office manager, was made ambassador to Rwanda and replaced by Marina Ayen Gregory Vasili, consolidating the family’s control over the Office of the President.¹²

Crisis meetings on 9 November between Bol Mel’s supporters and members of the family failed to produce an agreement. On 12 November, Bol Mel was fired as vice-president and first deputy chairperson of the SPLM. He was also stripped of his rank as general in the NSS, demoted to private, and then dismissed. The remainder of his close allies were also fired: Simon Akuei Deng was removed from the South Sudan Revenue Authority; Paul Logale Jumi (Bol Mel’s father-in-law) was dismissed from his position as secretary-general of the SPLM; and Addis Ababa Othou was replaced as governor of the Bank of South Sudan by Yohanes Samuel Kosta.

Removing Bol Mel proved to be even easier than getting rid of Paul Malong (Boswell, 2019) or Akol Koor Kuc (Craze, 2025), both tasks that Kiir carried off with aplomb. Kiir made the decision abruptly. Reportedly, Museveni and Muhoozi were not informed about the dismissal, which was met with consternation in Kampala.¹³ The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) were also not informed, and reacted angrily: Bol Mel had been central to several important business ties to the Sudanese paramilitary group.¹⁴ Kiir did reportedly inform the UAE during his visit at the end of October.¹⁵ Bol Mel has neither military forces nor a political constituency. His economic role was functional. He was thus replaceable, and becomes just the latest in a long line of politicians outsmarted by Kiir.

On 17 November, Kiir continued to dismiss Bol Mel allies, including Joseph Geng Akech, the justice minister widely seen as pushing for Machar’s ongoing trial. In an abrupt about-turn, Kiir also announced that Igga would be reinstated as

11 Chol Ajongo Mawut is a Luo from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, part of the same family as the state governor and an ally of Bol Mel.

12 Marina is Gregory Vasili’s daughter. The executive director in the Office of the President was also changed, with James Deng Wal appointed and Bol Mel’s ally, Ajing Deng, removed.

13 Author interviews with South Sudanese politicians, Kampala, November 2025.

14 Author interviews with RSF personnel, Kampala, November 2025.

15 Discussions by telephone with politicians, Juba, November 2025.

vice-president for the Economics Cluster. Igga, a veteran SPLM politician, is not thought of as a viable successor to Kiir. Akech's dismissal led to widespread rumours that Machar would soon be released from jail, as his principal opponent, Bol Mel, had been dismissed.

It is unlikely that it will be possible to plan for succession. In September 2025, one well-connected politician described the presidential palace as rife with rumours and suspicion, and observed that orders and appointments were often countermanded the day they were made, to mollify one group or another, or to prevent outright conflict.¹⁶ The delirious musical chairs in Juba, where politicians barely have enough time to sit down before their cabinet seats are snatched away, serve to keep everyone uncertain, and thus prevent them from posing a threat to Kiir's regime. But even if Kiir is not thinking of succession, it will nonetheless happen. We are all mortal. 'In that case,' one high-ranking politician said, 'the successor will be decided by whoever hears about Kiir's death first. That's why we are all competing for his attention. To say the death rites.'¹⁷

Conclusion

Kiir built a system dependent on his largesse, in which South Sudan's already modest institutions were emptied out and turned into sites of elite patronage and competition. He fractured the SPLM and immiserated the SSPDF. If, militarily, he has outsourced the monopoly of violence to militias pursuing local agendas under the mask of national interests, politically, he has empowered weak politicians, who are beholden to him. This does not make Kiir strong: the more the system is centralized around him, the more he is beholden to politicians whose constant demands he must appease, for there are no mediating institutions between rivalrous factions, only Kiir himself. The very questions of succession and orderly transition bandied about by diplomats are antithetical to the system that Kiir has created.

Kiir's triumph is South Sudan's disaster. No one has the political capital necessary to succeed Kiir and hold on to power. His demise will likely augur a period of rapid changes and deep uncertainty, as elite coalitions fracture and regroup. Perhaps the best-case scenario is that someone like Adut can cobble together enough of a coalition of self-interested elites that at least the Dinka of Bahr el Ghazal and Jonglei become sufficiently vested in a new iteration of Kiir's dictatorship. But increasingly, this seems unlikely to come to pass: the country is now too fractured. Whoever comes to power will inherit a bankrupt state and be reliant on foreign mercenaries to maintain control in Juba, while ruling the rest of the country through violence. Without Kiir's political capital, this is not a viable formula for rule. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

ABMC	Abiem Base Material Company/ Aggregate Building Material Company
CDF	Chief of defence forces
ISB	Internal Security Bureau
NSS	National Security Service
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Force

¹⁶ Telephone discussions with a senior SPLM politician, Juba, September 2025.

¹⁷ Author interview, name withheld, Juba, October 2025.

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