

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## Conflict and Crisis in South Sudan's Equatoria

By Alan Boswell



Thomas Cirillo, leader of the Equatoria-based National Salvation Front militia, addresses the media in Rome on November 2, 2019. (Photo by Andrew Medichini/AP)

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### Summary

- In 2016, South Sudan's war expanded explosively into the country's southern region, Equatoria, triggering a major refugee crisis. Even after the 2018 peace deal, parts of Equatoria continue to be active hot spots for national conflict.
- The war in Equatoria does not fit neatly into the simplified narratives of South Sudan's war as a power struggle for the center; nor will it be addressed by peacebuilding strategies built off those precepts. Most

Equatorians—a collection of diverse minority ethnic groups—are fighting for more autonomy, local or regional, and a remedy to what is perceived as (primarily) Dinka hegemony.

- Equatorian elites lack the external support to viably pursue their objectives through violence. The government in Juba, meanwhile, lacks the capacity and local legitimacy to definitively stamp out the rebellion. Both sides should pursue a negotiated settlement situated within

South Sudan's transitional period.

- On a national level, conflict resolution should pursue shared sovereignty among South Sudan's constituencies and regions, beyond power sharing among elites. To resolve underlying grievances, the political process should be expanded to include consultations with local community leaders. The constitutional reform process of South Sudan's current transitional period therefore deserves special focus.



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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the ongoing conflict in the Equatoria region of South Sudan and delineates the key actors and interests that will need to be accommodated in any attempt to resolve the crisis. Based on field research and interviews conducted in Equatoria and neighboring Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Kenya from 2016 to 2020, the report was sponsored by the Africa Center at the United States Institute of Peace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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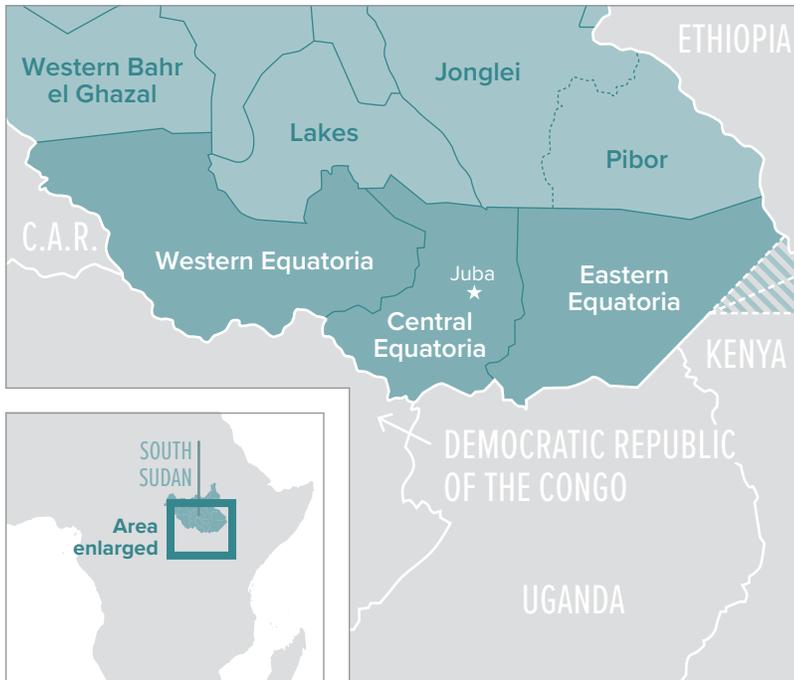


Women wait at a food distribution site in a United Nations camp outside Juba on March 22, 2018. (Photo by Kassie Bracken/New York Times)

## Introduction

South Sudan can be viewed as a failing state with multiple distinct war theatres, interlinked at the elite level by a revolt against a common political center. The country's civil war, which began in December 2013, initially pitted supporters of President Salva Kiir Mayardit, whose political base rests in the Bahr el Ghazal region in the country's northwest, against rebels from the Greater Upper Nile region in the northeast. South Sudan's third region, Equatoria—which spans the southern third of the country and includes Juba, the country's capital—remained relatively stable at first, with only isolated pockets of local conflict until late 2015.<sup>1</sup> However, in the second half of 2016, violence erupted across Equatoria. Hundreds of thousands of fleeing Equatorians poured into Uganda, adding to what is called Africa's largest refugee exodus since the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Some of the region's ethnic groups have nearly depopulated their home areas in their determination to avoid the violence.

In an effort to counterbalance the divide-and-rule tactics employed by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's regime during South Sudan's long liberation struggle, outsiders have tended to underweight the gravity of internal divisions in South Sudan in general and of Equatorian discontent in particular. As a result, the scale of the 2016 crisis in Equatoria shocked longtime South Sudan observers, as well as many South Sudanese. Refugees, aid workers, and Ugandan and Congolese border officials repeatedly described the South Sudanese government's actions at the height of the violence in the southern region, particularly in Central Equatoria, in terms of an ethnic cleansing—a scorched-earth counterinsurgency so systematic that its devastation could be seen from outer space.<sup>2</sup>



**MAP OF THE EQUATORIA REGION OF SOUTH SUDAN**

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

Of South Sudan’s three greater regions (see the adjacent map), Equatoria is the weakest politically, primarily owing to its political disunity and the absence of a clear “leader.” Equatorians lack all but the loosest collective political identity, though most of its groups share a collective perception of political marginalization. Deeply ingrained grievances, plus bouts of violent state

abuse, have fueled resentment against state actors. In some places, these resentments have sparked fierce ethnic animosity against the Dinka—South Sudan’s largest ethnic group—at the grassroots level. (In turn, other communities in South Sudan often feel that the Equatorians’ demands are unjustified, not least because of lingering claims that Equatorians did not participate fully in the liberation struggle from Sudan.) Regardless, the surge of popular support for Equatorian demands, including for greater self-rule, is likely to grow unless South Sudanese elites shift toward a political model that clearly shares power and resources rather than monopolizing them. This remaking of South Sudan is a long-term yet urgent project.

This report examines the conflict in Equatoria and delineates the key actors and interests that will need to be accommodated in any attempt to resolve the crisis in the region. It is based on field research and interviews conducted from 2016 to 2020 in Juba and Yei, in Central Equatoria; Yambio, Ezo, Li-Rangu, and Nadiangere, in Western Equatoria; and Kapoeta and Napotpot, in Eastern Equatoria. Additional interviews conducted outside South Sudan took place in Kampala, Arua, Koboko, Oraba, Yumbe, Moyo, Afoji, and refugee camps in Palabek, Imvepi, Bidi Bidi, and Moyo, in Uganda; Goma, Dungu, Doruma, and Aba, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>3</sup>

## Descent into War

The underlying political disputes that have shaped the conflict in Equatoria are not new. Ever since Southern Sudan’s first attempted experiment with unified self-rule in the 1970s, the collective political demands of Equatorians have remained remarkably consistent, suggesting that structural forces are at work. In Southern Sudan’s first period of self-rule, after the 1972 Addis Ababa accords, grievances over the political sway of ethnic Dinka led to Equatorian demands

for greater autonomy. The escalating political crisis, and consequent violence and war, culminated in the division of Southern Sudan into its three regions and the outbreak of Sudan's second long civil war in 1983. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended the civil war in 2005 set the South on its course to independence, which it eventually achieved in July 2011.

When South Sudan's own civil war began in 2013, nearly all the armed groups in the Equatoria region fought under the banner of the main armed opposition group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), led by Riek Machar, the country's newly reinstated first vice president. Many later switched allegiance to a new armed movement, the National Salvation Front, under the veteran Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) commander Thomas Cirillo, an Equatorian who defected from his position as a deputy chief of staff in South Sudan's military in early 2017. Cirillo did not sign the revitalized peace agreement of September 2018 (which followed the failed 2015 agreement); thus, areas of Central and Western Equatoria where his forces maintain a presence remain conflict zones. Cirillo and other "holdout" groups signed a new ceasefire with the South Sudanese government in January 2020, yet fighting continues.

## **OFF THE SIDELINES AND INTO THE STRUGGLE: 2013–16**

Equatorian elites struggled to position themselves within South Sudan's civil war. When the war broke out in December 2013, most Equatorians saw the conflict as a zero-sum power struggle between South Sudan's two dominant ethnic groups of the two other regions, the Dinka of Bahr el Ghazal and the Nuer of Greater Upper Nile. Few Equatorian elites joined Machar's rebel movement initially. Most sought—and failed—to assert a third, independent position toward the nation's crisis.<sup>4</sup> Yet during the first stages of peace talks in early 2014, mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Addis Ababa, the South Sudanese government objected to the participation of a proposed Equatorian delegation. Without Equatorian involvement in the negotiations, the peace talks merely mediated the power struggle between the government and the SPLM/A-IO and neglected to address the deeper national crisis.<sup>5</sup> This structure funneled the political process toward a centralized power-sharing model between elites and individuals rather than among regions or communities.

Tensions continued to rise, especially as members of the Equatorian elite demanded greater federalism (decentralization).<sup>6</sup> Shut out of the talks in Addis Ababa, some of Equatoria's leaders considered mobilizing an armed rebellion, either on their own or in conjunction with the SPLM/A-IO. However, they failed to achieve a durable coalition among elites or to receive the blessing (and support) of Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, without whose support an Equatorian movement would meet with severe challenges. Some of the Equatorian forces mobilized in these halting attempts to form a movement would be among the earliest to join the opposition militias under the SPLM/A-IO. Yet as tales of the Equatorian leadership's efforts to court Ugandan assistance for an armed struggle filtered back to the capital, President Kiir retaliated by removing some Equatorian elites, including governors Joseph Bangasi Bakosoro and Clement Wani Konga, from their high-level positions.

SPLM/A-IO leader Riek Machar, an ethnic Nuer from Unity State in the Greater Upper Nile region, in efforts to woo Equatorians to his rebel coalition, adopted federalism into his core demands.<sup>7</sup> Still, he was unable to make military headway in Equatoria until the signing of the



Riek Machar (left), leader of South Sudan's main opposition force, looks toward South Sudanese President Salva Kiir (in hat) after concluding negotiations of a peace treaty in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on August 17, 2015. (Photo by Mulugeta Ayene/AP)

August 2015 peace deal, which was structured primarily as a power-sharing arrangement between himself and President Kiir (an ethnic Dinka). Although it later collapsed, the 2015 peace deal spurred recruitment and mobilization efforts throughout Equatoria. In some places, especially the Mundri and Lainya areas, preexisting local community

militias (usually mobilized to counter migrating armed Dinka cattle herders) had engaged in active combat alongside the SPLA and forged strong ties to Machar. In other areas, militias sprang up almost overnight, as dormant groups revived and new ones mobilized recruits.<sup>8</sup> Machar benefited from Equatoria's relative exclusion from the 2015 peace accord, most notably the accord's binary nature that cast him as the sole "opposition leader" in South Sudan. Machar-allied Equatorians recruited youth to join the accord's cantonment and armed integration provisions as a way of seeking greater inclusion in the peace settlement. They promised lucrative ranks to youth and convinced some community elders that the new mobilization was a means of achieving greater representation in the nation's security services.<sup>9</sup>

The ensuing violence was far from inevitable, but the South Sudanese government's response to it escalated rather than defused the situation. Kiir's government resisted recognizing and did not include the gathering Equatorian forces in the peace settlement. Kiir and then-army chief of staff Paul Malong deployed the army, heavily infused with recent ethnic Dinka recruits known as the Mathiang Anyoor, with an apparent mandate to crack down on the opposition's mobilization and to punish communities for the "rebellion."<sup>10</sup> Abuse by these forces against civilian populations displaced entire communities, pushing even more young men to join the ragtag incipient rebellion.

## CRISIS AND FRAGMENTATION, 2016–18

By mid-2016, Equatoria sat on a knife's edge. Thousands of newly mobilized opposition forces demanded recognition in the shaky peace accord, even as the government began its own abusive counterinsurgency campaign. The collapse of the power-sharing agreement between Kiir and Machar dashed hopes for a peaceful resolution to South Sudan's conflict and ushered in Equatoria as the war's newest major theater of conflict. Machar, escorted by Equatorian forces and hundreds of Nuer bodyguards, left Juba and was pursued by government special forces hundreds of miles to the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>11</sup> Hundreds of

thousands fled to Uganda, sometimes whole villages en masse. In some cases, the rebels even encouraged civilians to evacuate areas where hostilities were likely to escalate and rebel forces were unlikely to withstand government attacks.

Equatoria's bleak predicament soon became apparent. Machar largely failed to supply the rebels with arms, despite repeated pleas for support from Equatorian commanders. Equatorian forces did not have the resources or military organization to defend their territory, and local-level commanders lacked the political heft to acquire external support. Refugees and fighters described a similar pattern of events: an SPLM/A-IO attack or ambush would be followed by harsh retaliation by government forces, often Mathiang Anyoor, against nearby towns and villages—burning homes, looting property, destroying crops, raping women, and killing men. Fleeing refugees took circuitous, remote routes to leave the country, believing that if they met soldiers outside of government garrison towns they would face abduction, sexual violence, or death.<sup>12</sup> Some also feared running into opposition forces, risking forced conscription or accusations of espionage.

Atrocities committed by government forces and Mathiang Anyoor on the one side, and roadside ambushes targeting Dinka civilians on the other, sharpened the stark ethnic nature of the conflict.<sup>13</sup> The government's extreme violence, whether as a top-down tactic or a product of Kiir's ill-trained youth recruits, laid the groundwork for the ongoing insurgency by deeply polarizing the community against the government.

Nevertheless, Equatoria's opposition elite failed to turn this intense popular grievance into a cohesive movement with unified demands, even as Equatorian forces swelled amid the large-scale displacement and atrocities. Although many of these new forces joined and fought under Machar's banner, most Equatorian elites declined to join him, viewing the SPLM/A-IO as a vessel for Machar's own ambitions and for ethnic Nuer interests. Machar himself did little to assuage these concerns when he appointed a Nuer, John Jok, as overall commander of Equatoria, and stationed a large contingent of loyalist Nuer forces in southern Central Equatoria.

In early 2017, Thomas Cirillo defected from his high-ranking position in South Sudan's military. Blasting Kiir for "imposing tribal hegemony on the country," he formed the National Salvation Front and took up residence in Addis Ababa.<sup>14</sup> Cirillo declined to join Machar, who was then under de facto house arrest in involuntary exile in South Africa.<sup>15</sup> Talks to make common cause with the other major Equatorian opposition figure, the populist former governor of Western Equatoria Joseph Bakosoro, broke down over who would lead.<sup>16</sup> Like Machar, Cirillo sought to portray himself as a national figure. Despite being an Equatorian, his official declarations did not explicitly champion Equatorian interests. He also appointed a rebel from Western Bahr el Ghazal as his military chief of staff. These moves proved significant, as Cirillo neither consolidated a pan-Equatorian front nor managed to significantly widen his political appeal or insurgency outside of Equatoria.

Yet some of the rebel commanders in Equatoria did switch allegiance from Machar to Cirillo, and the ensuing infighting further weakened the overall rebellion in Equatoria. John Kenyi Loburon, Machar's top general in Central Equatoria, joined Cirillo and subsequently clashed with Equatorian and Nuer elements of the SPLM/A-IO. In some areas, the question of whether to back Machar's or Cirillo's forces pitted chiefs and community leaders against one another. Those in favor of sticking with Machar made pragmatic arguments based on the need for a national coalition, as well as the dangers of switching allegiance after so many youth had joined the SPLM/A-IO. Those in favor of

joining Cirillo's National Salvation Front often pointed to the need for solidarity among Equatoria's Bari-speaking peoples.<sup>17</sup> On a deeper level, however, Cirillo's advocates sought to play off of deep resentments against the Nuer presence in Central Equatoria, problems with Machar's leadership, and internal squabbles between Equatorian commanders.<sup>18</sup> In one instance, rival commanders near Kajo Keji fought each other for days until the government seized the opportunity provided by their clashes to take back the territory.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of 2017, the Equatorian opposition forces had divided between the Machar and Cirillo camps. Machar maintained a heavy presence on the ground in all of Western, Central, and Eastern Equatoria, along with a contingent of elite Nuer forces in southern Central Equatoria.<sup>20</sup> Cirillo made the greatest inroads in his home region of Central Equatoria, although he also gained footholds in the Mundri and Maridi areas of Western Equatoria. Existing armed groups in other areas of Western Equatoria, particularly among the Azande community, and Eastern Equatoria, particularly among the Ma'di and Acholi communities, largely stayed in Machar's camp.

## **SOUTH SUDAN'S REMAINING CONFLICT ZONE, 2018 TO THE PRESENT**

In 2018, renewed regional efforts to end the violence led to the September 2018 peace deal among Kiir, Machar, and other opposition forces. Cirillo, however, did not sign the agreement, although he continued to express commitment to a December 2017 cessation of hostilities. As a national ceasefire between Kiir and Machar largely took hold across the country, an uptick in activity by Cirillo's forces in 2018 allowed them to make steady progress in gaining commanders and territory from the SPLM/A-IO in Central Equatoria. Some of this activity was driven by local dynamics and infighting among local commanders, but Cirillo's alienation from the IGAD-led peace talks provided a clear incentive for his forces to show that the National Salvation Front mattered on the ground.

Cirillo had a number of reasons to walk away from the 2018 peace talks. In interviews, he cited coercive pressure from Sudanese brokers after the peace talks moved from Addis Ababa to Khartoum in mid-2018 as a motive for leaving the talks. Cirillo also faced internal pressure, including from diaspora supporters, not to sign the accord. The structure of the talks largely replicated the same power-sharing formula found in the failed 2015 peace deal, which Cirillo had criticized for failing to address the root causes of the conflict. Further, although Cirillo led the largest rebel force outside of Machar's camp, IGAD did not give either Cirillo or the broader Equatoria crisis any prominence in the new peace talks. At that time, Cirillo's National Salvation Front was only one member of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance, a coalition of opposition groups, most of which had minimal to no armed presence on the ground. IGAD thus missed another critical opportunity to more fully address Equatorian grievances in the peace settlement (as did, for that matter, Equatorian political elites, who failed to directly champion their own cause for fear of appearing parochial).

Following the 2018 peace deal, Cirillo-aligned forces made further gains, especially in Central Equatoria, gradually supplanting the SPLM/A-IO insurgency as the ceasefire took hold between the government and Machar's forces.<sup>21</sup> Infighting, weak rebel military capacity, and SPLM/A-IO forces' abuses of civilians all degraded popular support for Machar, and low morale and poor

Any sustainable political settlement in South Sudan will need to accommodate Equatorian interests. Although Equatoria is diverse, core political demands are widely and deeply shared.

supplies led to many of his fighters leaving for neighboring refugee camps instead.<sup>22</sup>

By 2019, Central Equatoria remained the last major hot spot of South Sudan's civil war, even if some political violence continued elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> In January of that year, government forces launched new offensives against Cirillo's forces in Central Equatoria. Cirillo eventually left Addis

Ababa, his base, for Europe, where at The Hague he joined with other holdout groups to form the South Sudan Opposition Movements Alliance (SSOMA)—though once again he was the only rebel leader in the alliance to exhibit any clear military capacity on the ground.<sup>24</sup> A peace initiative by the Rome-based Roman Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio produced a cessation of hostilities between the government and SSOMA groups in January 2020, though that ceasefire was violated repeatedly in April and May amid renewed clashes between Cirillo and government forces, with some SPLM/A-IO forces reportedly teaming up with government troops to attack Cirillo. This fighting followed the familiar patterns of government military campaigns into rebel territory that succeeded mostly in displacing and punishing civilians, while the National Salvation Front insurgents deployed hit-and-run road ambushes.

As of the end of 2020, in much of southern Central Equatoria, government forces held garrison towns and the main roads linking them, with the SPLM/A-IO also maintaining a presence and Cirillo's forces loosely holding sway in much of the countryside. Vast areas of space remained contested and largely ungoverned. Several ethnic groups, including the Kakwa, Kuku, Pojulu, Kaliko, and Ma'di, as well as the Pajok community of the Acholi, remained systematically displaced, mostly in Uganda.

## Key Actors and Interests

Any sustainable political settlement in South Sudan will need to accommodate Equatorian interests. Although Equatoria is diverse, core political demands are widely and deeply shared. From the 1980s to the present, Equatorians have espoused consistent positions calling for greater devolution of power and a system of governance that shares power and resources more equally across South Sudan's three regions. Regional Equatoria conferences took place in 2001, 2002, 2011, 2013, and 2014.<sup>25</sup> These conferences proposed decentralized federalism or confederacy and the devolution of security and governance structures, though the attendees did not come to a shared agreement of what forms these should take.<sup>26</sup>

Equatorian elites have widely ascribed to tenets of the regional conferences, despite fragmentation across political camps, and the resolutions of these conferences are filled with claims of marginalization and calls for Equatorian "unity." Equatorian participants in South Sudan's National Dialogue process, launched by President Kiir in 2017 and which concluded in November 2020, strongly echoed these grievances and demands.<sup>27</sup> The following are the most cited grievances, many of which date back to the first self-rule period of the 1970s and continued through the SPLA's liberation movement:

## Historic Parallels: The “Kokora” Period

The current crisis in Equatoria holds notable parallels with a previous episode in South Sudanese political history: the advent of self-rule, followed by an escalation of ethnonationalist politics, that culminated in a bitter political crisis and a populist push by Equatorian elites for a new political system, and paved the way for another two decades of conflict. This series of events, in the 1970s and early 1980s, led to the splitting of Southern Sudan into three regions, an event known as Kokora (a Bari word for division), further driving support into the nascent SPLM/A insurgency.<sup>a</sup>

In 1972, the Sudanese government granted Southern Sudan semi-autonomy in a peace deal to end the Anyanya insurgency, led by Joseph Lagu, an Equatorian. After President Jafaar Nimeiri appointed Abel Alier, his vice president and a Bor Dinka, as the unified South’s first leader, Lagu eventually challenged Alier in elections, running in part on rising grievances against alleged Dinka dominance in the newly unified South. Lagu won, but after Nimeiri dissolved Lagu’s government, Alier returned to power in 1980 in what some called a “Dinka unity” campaign, increasing Dinka representation in national assembly to nearly 50 percent.<sup>b</sup> Multiple accounts suggest that politics at this time grew steadily more divided along ethnic lines, with supporters of both Alier and Lagu blaming the other for instigating tribal politics.

In 1981, Lagu published a pamphlet advocating “decentralizing” the South into several regions as a means of improving development and countering Dinka dominance in the South, a proposal that soon became known as Kokora.<sup>c</sup> Critics charged that Lagu was playing into Khartoum’s hopes of weakening the South. The Kokora debate, and the Equatorians’ demand for their own region, consumed Southern politics. The South’s 1982 election set “Divisionists” against “Unionists,” with polarizing results: Divisionists won the vast share of Equatoria’s seats in the Southern Regional Assembly, but Unionists won an easy majority by winning all but one seat in the rest of the South.<sup>d</sup> Nevertheless, in 1983, Nimeiri seized the opportunity and split the South into three regions—Equatoria, Bahr el Ghazal, and Upper Nile—as well as imposing sharia law.<sup>e</sup> Southern insurgents formed the SPLM/A the same year, under Dinka leadership, to oppose the Khartoum government. Few Equatorians joined the SPLM/A initially, viewing it as a hostile “Dinka” force bent on exacting revenge against Equatorians for the Kokora movement.<sup>f</sup> As a result, Equatorians remained broadly marginalized in the SPLM/A power structure that took control of the South in 2005, and eventually control of the new nation of South Sudan in 2011.<sup>g</sup>

This period shares important through lines with the current crisis. Kiir himself has suggested that the demands of the Equatorian elite for federalism should be resisted to avoid repeating Kokora.<sup>h</sup> Key actors in the Kokora period remain key actors today, including Bona Malwal and Ambrose Riny Thiik, the recent chair of the Jieng Council of Elders, both of whom have been, at least until recently, influential Kiir advisers. Meanwhile, Equatoria’s quest for federal arrangements, and mutual suspicion between Equatorian and Dinka elites, have persisted in South Sudanese politics, as do the long-standing concerns of ethnic minorities that a centralized South Sudan will marginalize them—with violence when necessary.<sup>i</sup> Cirillo has expressed sympathy for Lagu’s Kokora push, even as Dinka and other elites continue to assert the Kokora episode as justification for suppressing Equatorian demands and regarding Equatorian interests with suspicion.<sup>j</sup>

**Sources:** See notes on page 21.

- a system of governance that does not share power equally;
- underrepresentation at senior levels of political, security, and judicial institutions, and ethnopolitical partiality in the rule of law;
- mistreatment and “occupation” at the hands of security personnel;
- marginal share of state resources through formal and (primarily) informal channels;
- impunity toward land grabbing or disrespected land rights; and
- intrusion by and impunity for armed cattle herders, who often act as private militias for the political elite.<sup>28</sup>

Equatorians have varying interpretations of what federalism means in practice. At a local level, many believe it means regaining local control, especially through the withdrawal of national security forces, which many consider an occupying force. Calls for regional autonomy or a Kokora-styled confederacy for South Sudan’s three regions has surged again in popularity among Equatorians. (See the box on page 10 for a discussion of the parallels between South Sudan’s Kokora period and the contemporary crisis.) However, the need for a national political alliance has forced many Equatorians to promote less disruptive variants of decentralization and devolution instead.<sup>29</sup> These demands for federalism, in general, equate to less power in the hands of a central government, and more devolution of state resources and command of security services to regional or state authorities. They meet resistance from national state actors who fear a loss of authority and revenues, South Sudanese nationalists who fear more divisions will produce a weaker state, and South Sudanese concerned that calls for federalism are a facade for separatist or nativist agendas.

A key feature of the 2016 Equatorian mobilization was the absence of a single elite presence driving the process, but rather a broad mobilization with pockets of local support. Rebel fighters are still primarily responding to widespread grievances. Addressing those grievances remains the most direct path to bringing back peace. As gathered from numerous interviews over several years, many Equatorians feel politically homeless, since neither Kiir nor Machar credibly represent Equatorian interests, while Cirillo, Bakosoro, and other Equatorian elites outside Kiir’s and Machar’s camps have failed to build a broad coalition.

A peace process in Equatoria will thus need to accommodate several key actors. South Sudan’s many community leaders, although the most critical element, are often the most overlooked in current peacebuilding approaches. Some ethnic communities elect an elder as “chair”; others have hereditary chiefdoms. Identifying legitimate community-level representatives across Equatoria’s diverse communities is challenging but possible, to some degree. Church leaders also often play leading roles and act as peacebuilders on the ground, negotiating local ceasefires and humanitarian access. A survey of trusted interlocutors can identify legitimate community leaders versus those perceived as lacking independence from government or opposition influence.

## **THOMAS CIRILLO AND THE NATIONAL SALVATION FRONT**

Thomas Cirillo does not appear eager to join South Sudan’s current peace deal. As recently as January 2020 and February 2021, he has reaffirmed this stance in interviews. Since 2018, his strategy has been to bet that the peace deal will either fail or prove so disillusioning that he will gain a windfall from its discontents. If the peace deal does not collapse, his endgame is murky, since he does not have the material support to threaten Juba with demands to fundamentally

reshape the power structure in South Sudan.<sup>30</sup> Even so, Cirillo's movement, and thus the conflict in Equatoria, may well expand if disillusionment with the peace process grows.

Cirillo maintains popular sympathy in areas of Central Equatoria, especially, although his forces also abuse civilians.<sup>31</sup> He has been able to benefit from the deep unpopularity of Kiir's government as well as grievances against Machar's Nuer forces, which are still stationed in southern Central Equatoria near the Ugandan border. Nevertheless, Cirillo has found it difficult to expand his movement outside of Central Equatoria. Though he has forces in parts of the Mundri and Maridi areas of Western Equatoria, he has not made as much headway in Eastern Equatoria. Many Equatorians view his group as a "Bari" movement (a designation that can refer to the Bari people or most of wider Central Equatoria), which has affected his ability to attract followers. Cirillo himself is Bari, the largest of the Bari-speaking groups.

On the ground, Cirillo has patched together a network of community militias formerly aligned to Machar, but their coherence as a unified movement and loyalty to Cirillo is difficult to ascertain. Cirillo has also struggled to balance presenting an outward-focused "national" agenda, primarily to foreign actors, and promoting himself as a champion of Equatorian interests to Equatorian audiences. In March 2020, he released a formal National Salvation Front proposal for a federal system of governance based on substantial devolution of power and resources, with an "option for three regions," to be overseen by a transitional "Sovereign Council" made up of equal representatives from the three regions.<sup>32</sup>

The following individuals are notable Cirillo allies:

- **John Kenyi Loburon** (a member of the Pojulu ethnic group of Eastern Equatoria) was a low-ranking police officer prior to the war and led the rebellion in Wondoruba, Central Equatoria. Loburon defected from Machar to Cirillo in 2017 during the bitter leadership disputes among SPLM/A-IO commanders in the area and is now Cirillo's top field commander in Central Equatoria. The strength of his loyalty to Cirillo is unclear, since Loburon mobilized rebels and started fighting years before Cirillo left the government.
- **Simon Ayume ("Ramadan")** (Kakwa ethnic group, Eastern Equatoria) is a military commander operating near the Equatorian border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
- Cirillo's spokesman **Suba Manasseh** (Bari ethnic group, Eastern Equatoria) is a former deputy governor of Central Equatoria.

## PRESIDENT SALVA KIIR AND THE EQUATORIAN OLD GUARD

President Kiir's overriding strategic interest in Equatoria is security near Juba. An insurgency near Juba would threaten both the security of the capital and the country's main supply route from Uganda. Kiir and Dinka elites fear escalating demands for reform, which would weaken their hold on power and resources while also evoking fears of a new Kokora that would target nonnative people (and cattle herds) and threaten control of Juba and access to East Africa. Though the country's oil industry is its primary source of revenue, Equatoria is home to important secondary resources, including gold (mined informally in Central and Eastern Equatoria); timber and biomass, including teak plantations and dense forests that are used for making charcoal; and coveted grazing ground for cattle herders, primarily Dinka groups from Jonglei and Lakes States. Parts of Equatoria also have been touted as the country's future breadbasket, though farming remains primarily at subsistence levels and much of the country's market commodities are imported.



South Sudanese President Salva Kiir addresses the United Nations General Assembly on September 27, 2014.  
(Photo by Todd Heisler/New York Times)

Many Equatorian politicians remain allied to Kiir, even if they share many of the popular Equatorian grievances. However, their support among Equatorian constituencies, even on their own home turf, is questionable.<sup>33</sup> The following are notable Kiir allies:

- Vice President **James Wani Igga** (a member of the Bari ethnic group of Central Equatoria) is not considered a figure of significant power despite his senior position. His unflinching loyalty to Kiir has cost him political support among Equatorians, although some think he could emerge as a key player in an unexpected political transition.
- **Martin Elia Lomuro** (Pojulu ethnic group, Central Equatoria) is a top Kiir loyalist who has been a long-standing cabinet minister and a frequent envoy to peace talks.
- **Louis Lobong** (Toposa ethnic group, Eastern Equatoria) is the longtime governor of Eastern Equatoria and a strongman in the gold-rich Kapoeta area. He is key to maintaining the security of South Sudan's borders with Kenya and parts of Ethiopia.
- **Johnson Juma (J. J.) Okot** (Panyikwara clan of the Acholi ethnic group, Eastern Equatoria), a veteran of the SPLA, was, until April 2021 chief of the defense forces.
- **Mabuto Mamur Obote** (Latuko ethnic group, Eastern Equatoria), a veteran of the SPLA, has been viewed as a sidelined figurehead despite serving as Kiir's national security minister.

## FIRST VICE PRESIDENT RIEK MACHAR AND ALLIED FORCES

Riek Machar's primary interest in Equatoria is apparent: legitimizing a national political base outside his Nuer constituency and maintaining his status as the country's leading opposition figure. The top Equatorian officials in the SPLM/A-IO are motivated by a mix of national, regional, and local ambitions, but nearly all subscribe in principle to long-standing Equatorian demands and resolutions for a strong system of decentralized federation or confederation in South Sudan. The Equatorians in the movement describe their support for it in tactical terms. Most insist that they see Machar as the most viable leader of a national coalition against Kiir. Elites also are protective of their own positions and pay court to Machar, at times against each other. Ground commanders are motivated by both ambition and grievances. All have used populism and local issues—including land occupation, anger against invasive cattle-herding militias of the Dinka elite, marginalization in ranks, and subjugation—to mobilize their ground forces.

The Equatorian armed forces of the SPLM/A-IO are now just a fraction of the forces that mobilized at the peak of the crisis. The demobilization was fueled by a lack of material support, infighting among commanders, defections to both Cirillo and Kiir, and discontent with Machar's leadership. Machar gained most of his following in Equatoria from his advantage as an early mover; serious rivals to the SPLA did not emerge until 2017, after the peak of rebel mobilization in most of Equatoria had already crested. The bad blood with Cirillo's forces on the ground is so great that some SPLM/A-IO forces joined with the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (as the SPLA was rechristened in 2018) in operations against the National Salvation Front in April and May 2020, which could further erode lingering grassroots support for the SPLM/A-IO.

The following individuals are notable Machar allies:

- Machar's deputy, **Henry Odwar** (Lango ethnic group, Eastern Equatoria) is the top Equatorian in the SPLM/A-IO and the current minister of mining. Although well-respected, he was disconnected from military operations and lacks a large constituency.
- **Wesley Welebe** (Moro ethnic group, Western Equatoria) is deputy chief of staff and overall ranking commander of the SPLM/A-IO in the Equatoria region.
- **Oyet Nathaniel** (Pajok clan of the Acholi ethnic group, Eastern Equatoria) is a former Juba University professor and was Machar's military governor in Eastern Equatoria's Imatong area. He leads the SPLM/A-IO's efforts under the peace deal for constitutional reforms, which many Equatorian intellectuals consider the likeliest avenue for making progress on their political objectives.

As of mid-2020, discontent within the Equatorian bloc of Machar's party was high, especially after Machar passed over his deputy Odwar for his top two allotted ministerial positions, defense and oil. The Nuer-dominated command structure of the SPLM/A-IO continues to breed resentment, as well as complaints that Equatorian commanders are being demoted or stripped of their ranks, which had been inflated throughout the war as a recruitment mechanism.<sup>34</sup> In early 2020, James Nando, one of Machar's top commanders in Western Equatoria, and Joseph Albiros Yatta, his top commander in Central Equatoria, both switched allegiance to Kiir, followed later that year by Moses Lokujo, a major commander in Central Equatoria.

## Notable Nonaligned Figures in Equatoria

The following individuals are not strongly aligned with Kiir, Machar, or Cirillo, but nonetheless have significant influence in Equatoria:

- Former Central Equatoria governor and longtime anti-SPLA militia leader **Clement Wani Konga** is the elder strongman of the Mundari. President Kiir removed Konga from office in 2016, but Konga never formally joined the opposition.
- **Alfred Ladu Gore** is a popular veteran Bari politician who joined the SPLM/A-IO as Machar's deputy before returning to Juba in 2016. Ladu Gore ran unsuccessfully as an independent candidate against Clement Wani Konga for Central Equatoria governor in 2010, though he and others rejected the outcome as rigged.
- Former Western Equatoria governor **Joseph Bangasi Bakosoro** is currently the national minister of public service. Bakosoro is a principal in the South Sudan Opposition Alliance, a signatory to the September 2018 peace deal.

### UGANDAN PRESIDENT YOWERI MUSEVENI

Uganda, a key US ally in the fight against the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab in Somalia, remains the dominant regional power over the Equatoria region. Since 2014, President Yoweri Museveni has declined numerous attempts by Equatorian elites to secure Ugandan backing, yet Kampala remains the primary destination of choice for Equatorian political exiles, including those loyal to Machar during the civil war and those now loyal to Cirillo. Transit in and out of Uganda is also key for combatants, including at times for Kiir's government security forces.<sup>35</sup> Over the long run, Uganda likely will play a major role in Equatoria, as its support can prove decisive for either a government in Juba or any insurgency that wants to challenge it.

Museveni personally manages Uganda's policy toward South Sudan and remains Kiir's strongest regional ally. Museveni views himself as the godfather of the SPLA. The alliance between Museveni and Kiir is strategic and transactional; Kiir is interlinked with Museveni's regional policy, which has included countering Sudan's interests in South Sudan and forging closer ties with Egypt. Yet regional sources have indicated that Museveni has also been a client of Kiir's, receiving payment from Kiir in exchange for security services. Many Ugandan and South Sudanese actors attribute Museveni's suspicion of Equatorian power to the region's cross-border ethnic links to northern Uganda, the historic stronghold of Museveni's opposition.<sup>36</sup> Others suggest Museveni is opposed to Equatorian demands for federalism.<sup>37</sup>

Since the main forum for peace talks moved from Khartoum to Rome in 2020, Museveni has played a less determinative role. Uganda could still play a major role if it chose to broker a resolution to the conflict in Equatoria, but this appears unlikely under President Museveni.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the progress that has been made in bringing most of the violence of South Sudan's civil war to a halt, the immediate prospects for ending the fighting in Central Equatoria appear less rosy. Further, it is likely that the crisis in Equatoria will grow entrenched if peace talks do not gain momentum and as resentments from abusive counterinsurgency campaigns mount and disillusionment with the troubled Kiir-Machar peace process grows. Mediation missteps in the IGAD-led peace initiatives sidelined Equatorian interests and failed to keep Cirillo at the table in 2018. Few close observers believe that a political solution is near, given the gap between Cirillo's demands and his relative military weakness, as well as all parties' lack of major incentives to strike a compromise deal. Further, there are questions as to whether Cirillo's ground forces would stay loyal to him if he signed a deal with the hated Kiir regime.

To manage the ongoing tensions in South Sudan, a series of steps should be taken to mitigate the conflict and formulate a more feasible approach to addressing the demands of all parties.

**Push for a cessation of violence.** Strengthening a ceasefire should be a primary objective, especially if a negotiated political settlement appears not to be on the near horizon. The January 2020 ceasefire negotiated in Rome should be backed with credible authority. Regional and international powers set a poor precedent when they failed to criticize the government's offensives since January 2019 in an adequate and timely manner. Violations of the ceasefire in April and May 2020 received scant condemnation from the broader community. Regional envoys from neighboring countries and Western diplomats, particularly from the Troika (the United States, United Kingdom, and Norway) and the European Union, should work together to pressure all parties to cease violence and to expedite the political process between the government and Cirillo's National Salvation Front in Rome. Although the COVID-19 pandemic made diplomacy and negotiations more difficult, talks resumed in October 2020. If President Museveni actively intervenes, as he has in the past, to block regional pressure on Kiir to halt future fighting, then US pressure on Museveni could prove especially critical. Further, Western powers should continue to stress to Cirillo their rejection of political violence as an ongoing means of seeking change in South Sudan.

**Address long-standing Equatorian demands rather than draft simple power-sharing formulas.** The ongoing talks in Rome, and any future talks to end the conflict in Central Equatoria, should be seen as an opportunity to address underlying grievances that drive such fierce political discontent in the region. Since 2001, Equatoria's political positions have been prescribed in detail through a series of regional conferences. Facilitators and mediators should encourage the parties to address these issues for current and future conflict prevention.

A credible political process would be one that accommodates the people of Equatoria's long-stated core demands for structural protection against subjugation by a political center. Though it is tempting to blame political predation on South Sudan's current leadership, Equatorians broadly perceive a long-standing, historical structural bias of winner-take-all ethnic politics in which Equatorians always lose. Therefore, discussions aimed at bringing Cirillo's



National Salvation Front leader Thomas Cirillo addresses a press conference in Rome on November 2, 2019, during peace talks hosted by the Community of Sant'Egidio. (Photo by Andrew Medichini/AP)

movement into South Sudan's current peace process and the three-year transition period that would culminate in national elections should focus on bolstering the constitutional reform provisions of the September 2018 peace deal.

**Widen the consultation to the community level.** Talks with Cirillo and armed actors are necessary but insufficient. Elite-level political talks should be supplemented by direct political consultation with community representatives across the region as part of a wider process to reach a more durable political settlement for the South Sudanese people.<sup>38</sup>

South Sudanese often talk of blocs of communities, rather than elites, as the primary actors in the country's politics. Peacebuilding models that are not broadly inclusive of all of South Sudan's communities risk chronic conflict, especially because South Sudan's winner-take-all political dynamics incentivize forming a "just enough" ruling political coalition and thereby political exclusion. Wide consultation is vital because the Equatorial bloc's communities share similar but distinct grievances of marginalization and "occupation." For instance, the Ma'di of Eastern Equatoria's Pageri area are upset with alleged land grabbing by, and a loss of local control to, ethnic Dinka migrants, while the Moro of Western Equatoria's Mundri area are particularly aggrieved over encroaching cattle herders from neighboring Lakes State.

South Sudan's faith community, in consultation with civil society actors, could champion and lead such a process, which could be conducted in conjunction with or parallel to the peace negotiations. This could also build upon the National Dialogue process that concluded in November 2020 and documented deep discontent in Equatoria and elsewhere with the country's current leadership and trajectory.

**Rethink the model.** Groups in South Sudan that mobilized against the state since 2015, including Equatorians, have been motivated primarily by an objective of delivering protection from a winner-take-all political center. South Sudanese should consider greater devolution of power and resources, as well as formalizing mechanisms for sharing power among South Sudan's diverse constituencies in the central government. South Sudan's current model instead appears to produce structural incentives for polarizing ethnonationalist politics that thus far have produced a (violently) insecure Dinka nationalist government, Nuer-led challenges for power, the seeds of Equatorian separatism, and rebellions from other ethnic minorities.



The insurgency inside Equatoria continues despite the main peace deal of 2018 and the formation of a new national government in 2020 between President Salva Kiir and his rival, First Vice President Riek Machar. The peace deal, which produced a partially successful ceasefire between Kiir's and Machar's forces, has unfortunately done little to address the broader national crisis or end rampant insecurity across South Sudan. Like many of South Sudan's woes, the crisis and conflict in Equatoria stems from deep structural dilemmas and is the legacy of decades of conflict prior to South Sudan's independence and the political failures of its political elite. Bringing sustainable peace to Equatoria will thus require South Sudanese to take up the unfinished task of agreeing among each other on how to share power, resources, and sovereignty in the new nation-state they struggled so long to achieve.

# Notes

1. This report uses “Equatoria” to denote the Equatoria region, sometimes known as Greater Equatoria. From west to east, Equatoria borders the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia.
2. Satellite imagery from UNITAR (United Nations Institute for Training and Research), analyzed in March and April 2017, found an estimated eighteen thousand structures destroyed, mostly burned, near Yei, Morobo, and Kaya, and alongside the few major roads of the area.
3. From 2016 to 2018, the author’s field research contributing to this paper was supported by the United States Institute of Peace, Small Arms Survey, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Justice Africa, and UNICEF. Research and interviews conducted after October 2018 were performed in the author’s current capacity as a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group.
4. “Emergency Equatoria Conference 2014: Resolutions on the Current Crisis in the Country,” *Sudan Tribune*, January 10, 2014, [www.sudantribune.com/IMG/pdf/resolutions\\_eec\\_2014-1.pdf](http://www.sudantribune.com/IMG/pdf/resolutions_eec_2014-1.pdf).
5. Central Equatoria Governor Clement Wani Konga bluntly voiced this sentiment; see “Governor Konga Urges Equatorians to Stay Out of ‘Dinka-Nuer War,’” Radio Tamazuj, January 9, 2015, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/governor-konga-urges-equatorians-to-stay-out-of-dinka-nuer-war>. In a 2017 interview with the author, Konga advocated for peace talks to be centered on the regions instead of national parties: “If the Republic of South Sudan is to be a viable state, it is to be represented by the three regions of Equatoria, Bahr el Ghazal, and Upper Nile.”
6. For example, see “Konga: ‘We Will Continue to Talk about Federalism,’” Radio Tamazuj, July 4, 2014, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/konga-we-will-continue-to-talk-about-federalism>.
7. Many Equatorians inside and outside the SPLM/A-IO nonetheless remain skeptical about Machar’s commitment to their desired structural reforms, especially power devolution (author interviews, 2016–20).
8. See Alan Boswell, “Conflict in Western Equatoria,” Small Arms Survey, July 30, 2016, [www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/archive/south-sudan/conflict-crisis-2013-15/HSBA-Conflict-in-WES-July-2016.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/archive/south-sudan/conflict-crisis-2013-15/HSBA-Conflict-in-WES-July-2016.pdf). In Yei and southern parts of Central Equatoria, the areas most devastated by the 2016 violence, substantive mobilization for Machar began after the peace accord. However, the mobilization was not all voluntary. Refugees and community leaders report widespread forced conscription, although conscription into the SPLM/A-IO peaked after the collapse of the peace deal in July 2016.
9. In practice, the security provisions of the 2015 (and 2018) peace deals created patronage networks built on the promissory notes of future ranks and positions. Machar leveraged these promises to cultivate new groups and secure the support of old allies. See Alan Boswell et al., “The Security Arena in South Sudan,” Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics, and World Peace Foundation, December 2019, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102894/1/De\\_Waal\\_the\\_security\\_arena\\_in\\_south\\_sudan\\_published.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102894/1/De_Waal_the_security_arena_in_south_sudan_published.pdf); and Joshua Craze, *The Politics of Numbers: On Security Sector Reform in South Sudan, 2005-2020* (London: Centre for Public Authority and International Development, London School of Economics, 2020), [www.lse.ac.uk/africa/Assets/Documents/Politics-of-Numbers-Joshua-Craze.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/africa/Assets/Documents/Politics-of-Numbers-Joshua-Craze.pdf).
10. In an interview with the author, Malong said that the “cantonment” and integration provisions of the 2015 peace deal were only supposed to apply to Machar’s fighters in Greater Upper Nile, the main conflict-affected area at the time. Kiir’s own strength had been hindered by his depleted, factious, sporadically paid army and overstretched patronage network. See Alan Boswell, “Insecure Power and Violence: The Rise and Fall of Paul Malong and the Mathiang Anyoor,” Small Arms Survey, 2019, [www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/briefing-papers/HSBA-BP-Mathiang-Anyoor.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/briefing-papers/HSBA-BP-Mathiang-Anyoor.pdf).
11. For an account of Machar’s flight to Congo through Central and Western Equatoria, see Alan Boswell, “Spreading Fallout: The Collapse of the ARCSS and New Conflict along the Equatorias-DRC Border,” Small Arms Survey, 2017, [www.smallarmssurvey.sudan.org/fileadmin/docs/issue-briefs/HSBA-IB28-Spreading-Fallout.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurvey.sudan.org/fileadmin/docs/issue-briefs/HSBA-IB28-Spreading-Fallout.pdf).
12. For a survey of refugee accounts of sexual violence, see Chris Dolan, “Hidden Realities: Screening for Experiences of Violence amongst War-Affected South Sudanese Refugees in Northern Uganda,” Working Paper no. 25, Refugee Law Project, August 2017, [www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RLP.WP25.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RLP.WP25.pdf). Also see Amnesty International, “‘If Men Are Caught, They Are Killed, If Women Are Caught, They Are Raped’: South Sudan—Atrocities in Equatoria Region Turn Country’s Breadbasket into a Killing Field,” July 4, 2017, [www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR6566122017ENGLISH.PDF](http://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR6566122017ENGLISH.PDF). For an argument that the sexual violence in Central Equatoria should be termed “genocidal rape,” see Clémence Pinaud, “Genocidal Rape in South Sudan: Organization, Function, and Effects,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2020): 667–94.
13. For more accounts of the human rights abuses in Central and Eastern Equatoria in 2016 and 2017, see the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *Report of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan*, March 13, 2018, 7–10, [www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session37/Documents/A\\_HRC\\_37\\_71\\_EN.docx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session37/Documents/A_HRC_37_71_EN.docx).

14. The full text of Cirillo's March 6, 2017 "declaration" of the National Salvation Front is available at [www.nassouthsudan.com/declarations](http://www.nassouthsudan.com/declarations).
15. According to author interviews with Cirillo between 2017 and 2020, widespread open discontent among foreign powers, both regional and Western, with both Kiir's and Machar's leadership may have contributed to Cirillo's decision to go it alone.
16. Bakosoro subsequently formed his own movement, the National Movement for Change. He failed to build a significant armed presence on the ground, and, together with Cirillo's National Salvation Front, joined the South Sudan Opposition Alliance in 2017. In March 2020, he was appointed as a national minister in the new Kiir-Machar unity government.
17. "Bari-speaking" refers to ethnic groups that speak languages within the Bari language family, including the Bari, Mundari, Pojulu, Nyagwara, Kakwa, and Kuku. Together, most of the population of Central Equatoria speaks these languages.
18. Author interviews with refugees, community and civil society leaders, and opposition fighters, Uganda, 2017.
19. According to interviews the author conducted in Uganda, this refers to fighting between Cirillo's National Salvation Front and Machar's SPLM/A-IO in the Kajo Keji area in 2017.
20. John Jok, Machar's top commander in Equatoria, later also took a contingent of Nuer forces across Eastern Equatoria to the Kapoeta area, setting up near the Kenyan border. This left John Mabieh as the top Nuer commander in Central Equatoria.
21. Groups loyal to Machar generally remained unintegrated and could yet rebel or switch allegiances to Cirillo—or even, in some cases, to Kiir. In 2020 alone, senior Machar commanders James Nando, near Yambio; Albiros Yatta, the top commander in Central Equatoria; and Moses Lokujo, his top commander in the Kajo Keji area, defected to Kiir's camp.
22. In private interviews conducted between 2017 and 2018, some SPLM/A-IO Equatorian commanders would admit terrible abuses they also inflicted on civilians during factional infighting, and the poor accountability over thuggish local warlords.
23. For instance, clashes persisted in Maiwut, in eastern Upper Nile State, and Baggari, in Wau State. In both cases, the conflict related to splits in Machar's forces, some of whom switched allegiance to Kiir.
24. SSOMA is an alliance primarily between Cirillo, Kiir's former army chief of staff Paul Malong, and former SPLM secretary-general Pagan Amum, each a leader of their respective opposition parties. The alliance split into two factions in October 2020, with Cirillo breaking from both Amum and Malong, who remained allied. Cirillo's alliance with Malong had been especially awkward, given that Malong oversaw the abusive military campaigns in Equatoria in 2016 and 2017 and is chiefly associated with the Mathiang Anyoor.
25. See Adam Branch and Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, "Winning the War, but Losing the Peace? The Dilemma of SPLM/A Civil Administration and the Tasks Ahead," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43, no. 1 (2005), 6–7; "First Equatoria Regional Congress: Yei-New Sudan, November 27, 2002 to December 2, 2002," communiqué in author's files; "Equatoria Conference 2011—Justice, Unity and Prosperity," April 16, 2011, communiqué in author's files; "Equatoria Conference 2013: Consolidating Justice, Unity & Prosperity," February 18, 2013, communiqué in author's files; and "Emergency Equatoria Conference 2014," *Sudan Tribune*, January 10, 2014.
26. Douglas Johnson, "Federalism in the History of South Sudanese Political Thought," Rift Valley Institute, 2014, [www.riftvalley.net/publication/federalism-history-south-sudanese-political-thought](http://www.riftvalley.net/publication/federalism-history-south-sudanese-political-thought); and Mareike Schomerus and Lovise Aalen, "Considering the State: Perspectives on South Sudan's Subdivision and Federalism Debate," Overseas Development Institute and Chr. Michelsen Institute, August 2016, [www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10837.pdf](http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10837.pdf).
27. Extensive minutes of delegate views in Central Equatoria and Eastern Equatoria are documented on the National Dialogue website, [www.ssnationaldialogue.info](http://www.ssnationaldialogue.info). See Republic of South Sudan National Steering Committee, "Central Equatoria Sub-Committee Report for Yei River State, Jubek State, and Terekeka State," [www.ssnationaldialogue.info/resource/central-equatoria-sub-committee-report](http://www.ssnationaldialogue.info/resource/central-equatoria-sub-committee-report); and "Grass-Roots Consultations Final Report Details For Eastern Equatoria," [www.ssnationaldialogue.info/resource/grassroot-consultative-meetings-eastern-equatoria-sub-region-report](http://www.ssnationaldialogue.info/resource/grassroot-consultative-meetings-eastern-equatoria-sub-region-report). In National Dialogue consultations, refugee communities expressed similar views.
28. The intrusion of cattle herders into Equatoria was a key driver of the Kokora campaign and was central in producing community militias across Equatoria that got pulled into South Sudan's civil war. See Rens Willems and David Deng, "The Legacy of Kokora in South Sudan," South Sudan Law Society, UPEACE Centre, and PAX, November 2015, [www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/the-legacy-of-kokora-in-south-sudan](http://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/the-legacy-of-kokora-in-south-sudan). It is a particularly bitter grievance that continues to this day. In April 2020, the Equatoria bloc of legislators in the national parliament petitioned to Kiir, accusing Dinka Bor cattle herders of "abduction, killing, and displacement" in Equatoria, "a bitter reminder of the suffering of our people the South Sudanese under the Arabs before our independence" (press statement, April 21, 2020, author's files).
29. In 2017 and 2018, the National Dialogue consultations in Central Equatoria documented strong demands for a "confederal" model built on the three greater regions.
30. The worrying scenario is that Cirillo's path follows that of Darfuri rebel Abdel Wahid al-Nur, who loosely oversees a protracted weak rebellion in Darfur from exile in Europe without any clear path to realizing absolutist demands.

31. United Nations experts on South Sudan concluded that Cirillo has “widespread local support” in Central Equatoria. See Letter from Panel of Experts on South Sudan to the President of the United Nations Security Council, April 28, 2020, <https://digital.library.un.org/record/3859900>.
32. National Salvation Front, “The Federal System Model of South Sudan: Executive Summary,” March 2020, [www.nassouthsudan.com/download/20201027-policy-document-the-federal-system-model-of-south-sudan](http://www.nassouthsudan.com/download/20201027-policy-document-the-federal-system-model-of-south-sudan).
33. Before the 2013 fracturing of the SPLM, most Equatorian elite subscribed to a strategy they called “peace from within,” which meant pushing for incremental reforms inside the SPLM. After the outbreak of the war, many Equatorian elite feared the violent consequences of opposing Kiir. This fear is especially strong for communities close to Juba—the Bari and Mundari.
34. An example comes from a letter to Riek Machar from senior SPLM/A-IO official Oyet Nathaniel Pierino, “REF: POINTS OF CRITICAL CONCERNS IN THE UNIFICATION OF FORCES AND SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS” (April 19, 2020), which was posted publicly on Nathaniel Pierino’s Facebook page on April 28, 2020, <https://web.facebook.com/Nathaniel.pierino/posts/2964500543617701>.
35. The SPLA used Ugandan territory to transfer, pay, and resupply several positions, including Kaya, Jale, and Kajo Keji. SPLM/A-IO members and other opposition figures were usually granted informal freedom of movement, provided rebels did not carry weapons across the border.
36. Milton Obote, an ethnic Lango from northern Uganda (distinct from the ethnic Lango of South Sudan’s Eastern Equatoria) who twice served as president of the country, heavily recruited and promoted Acholi forces. Ugandan President Idi Amin was an ethnic Kakwa. Kakwa and Acholi militias are active on both sides of the South Sudan conflict.
37. “Museveni doesn’t want federalism,” said Clement Wani Konga in a 2017 interview with the author.
38. During the grassroots consultations of the National Dialogue process, delegates also made many frank demands. Some of these are extensively documented on the National Dialogue website.

## NOTES FOR “HISTORIC PARALLELS: THE ‘KOKORA’ PERIOD” (PAGE 10)

- a. For a longer overview of the Kokora episode, see Rens Willems and David Deng, “The Legacy of Kokora in South Sudan,” South Sudan Law Society, UPEACE Centre, and PAX, November 2015, [www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/the-legacy-of-kokora-in-south-sudan](http://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/the-legacy-of-kokora-in-south-sudan).
- b. Lam Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Inside an African Revolution* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 2011), 12; and Mom Kou Nhial Arou, *Regional Devolution in the Southern Sudan, 1972–1981* (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, September 1982), 224.
- c. The pamphlet, “Decentralization: A Necessity for the Southern Provinces of the Sudan,” included a chart alleging that ethnic Dinka held half of the senior posts in the regional government. The pamphlet was reprinted in Joseph Lagu, *Sudan: Odyssey through a State from Ruin to Hope* (Omdurman, Sudan: MOB Center for Sudanese Studies, Omdurman Ahlia University, 2006).
- d. For the “Unionists” versus “Divisionists,” see Arop Madut-Arop, *The Genesis of Political Consciousness in South Sudan* (self-published, 2012), 247.
- e. In one account, Nimeiri told the governors that he had divided the southern region to reduce the numerical strength and power of the Dinka majority of smaller tribes, and instructed them to form tribal militias for protection (Madut-Arop, *Sudan’s Painful Road to Peace*, 105).
- f. According to Lam Akol, an early student mobilizer for the SPLA in Khartoum, some 90 percent of early SPLA recruits from Khartoum were Dinka. (Akol, *SPLM/SPLA*, 21). For more on initial Equatorian hostility towards the SPLM/A, see Paul Wani Gore, “The Overlooked Role of Elites in African Grassroots Conflicts: A Case Study of the Dinka-Mundari-Bari Conflict in Southern Sudan,” Sudan Working Paper, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2014, 10, [www.cmi.no/publications/5314-the-overlooked-role-of-elites-in-african](http://www.cmi.no/publications/5314-the-overlooked-role-of-elites-in-african); and Peter Adwok Nyaba, *Politics of Liberation in South Sudan* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2000), 28.
- g. For more on the legacy of Kokora on poor relations between Equatorians and the SPLM/A, see Mareike Schomerus, “Violent Legacies: Insecurity in Sudan’s Eastern and Central Equatoria,” Small Arms Survey, June 2008, [www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-13-C-E-Equatoria.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-13-C-E-Equatoria.pdf).
- h. “The issue that people are raising now, that is the same issue that came in 1983. Kokora. And Kokora should not again derail us from what we are doing.” See “Kiir Raises Fears of ‘Kokora’ under Federal System,” Radio Tamazuj, July 10, 2014, <https://radio.tamazuj.org/en/news/article/kiir-raises-fears-of-kokora-under-federal-system>. Kiir later proclaimed less hostility to federalism.
- i. Lagu’s memoirs quote Justin Yac, a Dinka Bahr el Ghazal politician, as delivering the following lines in the South’s assembly: “The British ruled for 50 years, the northerners for 17 years. We shall rule for 100 years whether you like it or not; we are the majority tribe” (Lagu, *Sudan*, 386). The alleged quote is still frequently cited as proof of a Dinka conspiracy.

j. In a December 2017 interview, Cirillo said that Lagu was justified to push for Kokora in the 1980s: “If you go to the history of the government of Southern Sudan in 1972. . . . I think Lagu had all the justifications to call for Kokora for all that domination, which is now being done worse by SPLM in South Sudan by far. Worse in a very cruel way.” One limited survey found a lingering divide on the popularity of federalism in South Sudan. A 2013 poll of Juba university students found that 87.8 percent of Greater Equatorial students favored federalism, compared to only 18.2 percent of students from Bahr el Ghazal. “Federalism Is ‘Not the Same as Kokora,’ Says Scholar,” Radio Tamazuj, July 7, 2014, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/federalism-not-the-same-as-kokora-says-scholar>.

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