



George Athor Rebellion, Jonglei State

Lt. Gen. George Athor, a dissident Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) commander and unsuccessful 'independent' candidate for the governorship of Jonglei state, launched a self-proclaimed armed rebellion against the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) in the aftermath of the April 2010 elections. George and his forces, considered the most powerful of the post-election insurrectionists, orchestrated numerous clashes following the announcement of his defeat. The first incident, involving an attack against the SPLA's base in the tense Doleib Hill area south-west of the Upper Nile state capital, Malakal, left at least eight dead; subsequent clashes resulted in a substantial deterioration in the security situation in the north-western corner of Jonglei state.

Negotiations in October 2010 between the SPLA and a delegation representing George were cause for initial optimism that this post-elections dispute could be resolved prior to the January referendum and potentially pave the way for broad political and military reconciliation among Southerners. The talks quickly reached a stalemate, however, prompting GoSS President Salva Kiir to issue a presidential decree on 2 December ordering direct talks between George and a government delegation to be led by church leaders at an undisclosed location. The talks took place in late December (without George); at the very same time, the SPLA clashed with his men in Pigi county, claiming the lives of up to 20 soldiers, according to the army. This figure has not been independently verified.

A week later, credible rumours surfaced that former allies of George's within the SPLA were frustrated with his refusal to accept a deal. A last-minute agreement was then brokered just days before the start of the referendum. On 5 January Vice-President Riek Machar, who had not been publicly involved in any of the mediations, presided over a ceremony in Juba, where delegations representing both sides signed a 'permanent cease-fire agreement'.

While the agreement has been well received, it does have a number of weaknesses. Despite providing a timeline for the assembly and reintegration of George's forces, it does not include consequences if its terms are not implemented. Nor does it resolve a key question that repeatedly led to stalemates during previous rounds of mediations: the rank at which George, a former deputy chief of staff and lieutenant general, will be reintegrated.

Some camps within the SPLA appear dissatisfied with the agreement, and as of 10 January George had yet to travel from an undisclosed location near the Upper Nile state capital Malakal to meet in person with the SPLA leadership in Juba. Although the agreement is likely to hold during the Southern referendum and its aftermath, it is unclear whether the army will be able to keep George within its ranks in the longer term. The protracted negotiations with him and the difficulty the SPLA faced in quelling the insurrection over a period of several months highlight the army's fragility in what is likely to become the world's newest nation.



George joined the SPLA in 1983, in the early stages of its war against Khartoum, and fought on various fronts throughout the conflict. After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005, he was promoted to the rank of major general and assigned division commander in Upper Nile state, where he was widely suspected of involvement in a local conflict near the Upper Nile–Jonglei state borders in the Atar–Khorfulus region. He was also involved in a violent SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign in 2006, which claimed more than 1,500 lives. He was then promoted to the rank of lieutenant general and made division commander in Jonglei state as well as SPLA deputy chief of staff for political and moral orientation. In early 2010 he launched his gubernatorial bid before the April 2010 elections.

While his initial support base was in the Canal–Khorfulus area, the SPLA announced in September 2010 that they believed he had moved east across Jonglei state and was in hiding near the Ethiopian border. He is Padeng Dinka, a sub-clan culturally close to the Nuer from this area of Jonglei.

Rumours abound as to the sources of his support. In contrast to other leaders of post-election insurrections, he has not necessarily needed the support of external actors. Indeed, he ranked high in the SPLA, enjoyed the loyalty of the military and local populations in his home area, and reportedly acquired significant wealth through corruption during his time as division commander of Jonglei. After he ceded his post as the top SPLA official in Jonglei, rumours spread that he had been accounting (and thus receiving salaries) for many more soldiers—in the thousands according to some—than he had under his command in the state. He may also have armed his supporters with weapons collected during the SPLA’s disarmament attempt in Jonglei in 2006, as well as post-election clashes with the army.

The GoSS and SPLA have repeatedly alleged that he received support from the Khartoum government. Various allegations also circulated regarding possible allegiances with other dissident Southern political and military figures. There is no evidence to support any of these claims, however.

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