

Vates Special Report: Juba Clashes and South Sudan Security Sector Crisis

Security/Political Analysis
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Executive Summary

On Nov 21 2024, at approx. 1930hrs, heavy gunfire erupted in the Tongping area of Juba near the airport when Military Intelligence (MI) units under Lt. Gen. Stephen Marshall Babanen clashed with security guards of recently dismissed National Security Services (NSS) Director Akol Koor Kuc. Four civilians were killed in the ensuing battle, which involved artillery fire. The situation was contained after several hours following the arrival of SSPDF Chief of Staff Santino Deng Wol. Akol Koor was subsequently placed under house arrest in Juba's Jebel area and kept incommunicado.

The South Sudanese security sector has undergone rapid transformation since early Oct 2024. These shifts have destabilised the country, with the situation extremely fragile and on the brink of collapse. This represents the most significant transformation of the security apparatus and political landscape since the ousting of Paul Malong, former Chief of Staff of the SPLA, in 2017. The importance of the R-ARCSS peace deal, the ongoing Tumaini Initiative, and discussions about reforms and prospective 2026 elections are nowhere near in significance compared to the realignment within the top echelons of the military-political complex of the SPLM.

Background: Four Centres of Military Power

Between the ousting of Paul Malong in 2017 and Oct 2024, South Sudan had four centres of military power that held more-or-less equal political and military influence and acted as checks-and-balances on each other. None were powerful enough to successfully attempt a coup alone, and each was led by individuals with personal enmities and suspicions of each other, making cooperation for a coup hardly imaginable.

SSPDF (National Army): Led by UN-sanctioned Santino Deng Wol (Dinka Malual) since Apr 2021. Commands 12+ divisions with barracks nationwide, mechanised heavy equipment and artillery, and experienced battle-hardened commanders. However, no salaries since Oct 2023, minimal equipment, almost no presence in Juba, bound by R-ARCSS, low morale, with largely mono-ethnic divisions.¹

NSS (National Security): Led by Akol Koor Kuc until Oct 2024. Elevated to a state within the state with agents at all levels of society, own revenue stream, arrest without warrant powers, modern wiretapping capabilities, well-armed multi-ethnic units with relatively high salaries paid until Oct 2024. NSS operates lucrative checkpoints extorting millions monthly, controls Oil Protection Units, censorship, media, and has extensive commercial interests in petroleum, gold mining, aviation, and logistics companies.²

MI (Military Intelligence): Reorganised from Feb 2019 under Rin Tueny Mabor, empowered by Kiir to counteract NSS. MI essentially spies on NSS throughout the country. After Tueny's removal in Jun 2021, Stephen Marshall Babanen (highest-ranking Murle in SSPDF) took command. Babanen was removed in May 2024 under pressure from Akol Koor but secretly reappointed in Oct 2024 following Koor's dismissal.³

Tiger Division (Presidential Guards): Empowered since 2017 as Kiir became increasingly paranoid about personal protection following Jul 2016 palace gunfire exchange. Commanded by Lual Wek Guem 'Maroldit' (Dinka Rek from

¹The Mathiang Anyoor was a predominantly Dinka militia, commanded primarily by officers originating under Santino Deng Wol in SPLA Division 3. Wol played a leading role in recruiting, training, and overseeing the force during Paul Malong's tenure.

²NSS detention facilities, most prominently the Blue House and Riverside, are known locations of torture and extrajudicial killings. NSS retained rights to apprehend and arrest anyone without court order, and can detain individuals indefinitely and incommunicado.

³UN Panel of Experts (2020): "Major General Tueny continued to recruit, train and arm forces... recruited, trained and armed a militia of over 1,500 youth from cattle camps in the areas of Adior and Wunthou, Lakes... diverted ammunition and weapons, including heavy artillery, from the stocks of the SSPDF military intelligence to a militia under his control."

Gogrial), comprising a full division (12,000) of trained, well-equipped men mostly from Kiir's home area, primarily based in and around Juba. Tiger Division was the major counterbalance to NSS forces in the capital.

System Collapse: The Oil Pipeline Rupture

The triangulation of power between SSPDF-NSS-MI-Tiger ensured relative stability. However, cracks appeared when the oil pipeline ruptured in Feb 2024 and the president's office quickly ran out of cash. Salaries first disappeared at SSPDF and MI, destabilising the core system. As revenue became insufficient to keep forces paid and content, Salva Kiir took the unusual decision to dismiss both Akol Koor and Lual Maroldit simultaneously. Rather than allow an unstable single-pillar system to emerge, Kiir moved to neutralise all potential rivals simultaneously – a gamble that has left the security architecture without its traditional foundations.

Kiir's decision is not simply coup-proofing but an attempt to take over NSS revenue streams. Control over NSS's extortion machine is central to South Sudan's political economy. However, at first glance, Kiir has destabilised the system to a dangerous level that could potentially lead to new civil war.⁴

The Nov 21 Incident

On Nov 21, MI units under recently reinstated Babanen attempted to arrest Akol Koor Kuc. The situation escalated into a firefight between MI units and Koor loyalists, with the government side employing artillery. The gunfire lasted approx. 30-60 minutes. SSPDF Chief of Staff Santino Deng Wol arrived several hours after the outbreak to contain the situation. Days later, Akol Koor was escorted to another house and placed under effective house arrest, submitting his phones and communication equipment.

There are signs that Santino Deng Wol is attempting to turn Babanen into a scapegoat and distance himself from events. High-ranking SPLM/SSPDF members were appalled by Kiir's decision to dismiss Akol Koor while he was out of country, lure him back with promise of Warrap governorship, only to rescind it the day he landed in Juba. This has already damaged Kiir's posture.

Figure 1 Akol Koor Kuc. Source: @Tonjtimes

Scenarios for Akol Koor

Akol Koor is at the mercy of Salva Kiir, who must act carefully. Kiir has several options:

- 1. Assassinate Akol** – Would weaken Kiir with potential to be seen as cowardly; could destabilise Warrap; damage military commanders' trust in Kiir's leadership.
- 2. Show-trial and imprisonment** – Similar to Stephen Buay's treatment in 2018 (found guilty of treason, sentenced to one year, pardoned, allowed exile to Nairobi). However, no evidence of Koor's planned coup has been shown.
- 3. Indefinite house arrest** – Current status; kept incommunicado. Sustainable short-term but Koor remains a threat while alive.
- 4. Amnesty as "civilian"** – Kept in Juba under close watch. Would demonstrate magnanimity but keeps the threat proximate.
- 5. Exile** – Removes immediate threat but allows Koor to potentially organise opposition from abroad.

Given Kiir's recent erratic behaviour, it is not impossible that forces loyal to Kiir will attack Akol Koor again. As long as Koor is around, he remains a threat to Kiir.

⁴Stephen Abut Thiokol, Babanen's replacement in May 2024, served as chief of NSS' Political Division and was a loyal ally of Akol Koor. Thiokol – a UN-sanctioned commander – carried out the execution of several high-profile civil society activists and opposition politicians.

Assessment: Threats to Stability

Near Term: The situation remains extremely fragile. Further clashes between MI and NSS loyalists cannot be ruled out. Kiir's handling of Akol Koor will be closely watched by military commanders whose trust in his leadership has already suffered. Instability in Warrap could escalate rapidly if Koor is killed. The government has no solution to fundamental problems: runaway inflation, systematic corruption, complete state capture by kleptocratic elites, and accumulated salary arrears.

Medium Term: Competition for control of NSS revenue streams will almost certainly intensify. The dismantling of the four-pillar security architecture removes the checks-and-balances that prevented coup attempts. While Kiir has taken extreme coup-proofing steps and historically played major actors against each other, the dismissal of potentially dangerous figures does not address underlying structural problems.

Long Term/Coup Risk: While it is difficult to predict coup probability or an overthrow attempt, we assess there to be growing discontent and when considering the constraint on funds from the oil pipeline it may become more difficult for Kiir to continue to placate disparate groups through short term appointments. Furthermore, historically, coups have been less likely to come from high-ranking officers with much to lose, but from middle-ranking charismatic captains and colonels who turn their peers and the public to their side.⁵

Conclusion

The Nov 21 clashes and subsequent detention of Akol Koor represent a critical juncture in South Sudan's political trajectory. Kiir's simultaneous removal of both Akol Koor and Lual Maroldit has fundamentally altered the security architecture that maintained fragile stability since 2017. While ostensibly coup-proofing efforts, these actions have paradoxically increased instability by removing the checks-and-balances system.

The situation is expected to remain fluid with the security sector in crisis. Understanding these shifts, the histories of key players, their connections, and potential new alignments is essential for preparing for future developments. What is clear is that these changes are part of political preparation for a post-Kiir period, and the coming months will likely prove critical in determining whether South Sudan descends into renewed civil conflict or navigates this transition without large-scale violence. **End**

⁵John Garang was a colonel when his Battalion 105 mutinied against the regime in Bor in 1983, sparking the second Sudanese civil war.