



George Athor Rebellion, Jonglei State

Lt.-Gen. George Athor, a dissident Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) commander and unsuccessful ‘independent’ candidate for governor 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 orchestrated numerous clashes following the announcement of his defeat. The first incident, when George attacked the SPLA’s base in the tense Doleib Hill area south-west of the Upper Nile State capital, Malakal, left at least eight dead, and subsequent clashes have resulted in a substantial deterioration in the security situation in the north-western corner of Jonglei State. A clash between George and the SPLA in May 2010 left more than 50 dead. The GoSS’s attempts to resolve the George dispute both politically and militarily have failed; the most recent statements from the SPLA leadership in Juba indicate that he is still at large. The SPLA continues to claim that its forces are chasing George and has accused him of receiving support from Khartoum.

George is believed to have drawn some of his supporters from his native area of Canal–Khorfulus, where north-western Jonglei State meets south-western Upper Nile, while George himself claims that some among his ranks are defected SPLA soldiers who were loyal to him while he served as SPLA commander in the state. The SPLA, however, denies that any of its troops have defected to George’s camp; initially the SPLA claimed that George had ‘not more than one hundred soldiers’ under his command, but it is impossible to accurately estimate the size of his militia given its remote and inaccessible location. All that is known is that George and his men have proven capable of playing a destabilizing role, regardless of their size, since launching their armed campaign.

George joined the SPLA in 1983, in the early stages of its war against Khartoum, and fought on various fronts throughout the war. After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005, George was promoted to the rank of major-general and assigned as the 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 and had also been involved in a violent SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign in 2006, which claimed more than 1,500 lives. George was later promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general and made division commander in Jonglei State as well as deputy chief of staff for SPLA political and moral orientation. He was SPLA division commander for Jonglei state prior to launching his gubernatorial bid before the April 2010 elections. After he ceded his post as the top SPLA official in Jonglei, rumours spread that George 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.



George maintains his support base in the Canal–Khorfulus area. While he has effectively mobilized supporters in several surrounding counties in Jonglei, including Ayod and Waat, recent estimates put his location in a remote area on the west side of the canal, south-east of Atar. George is Padeng Dinka, a sub-clan culturally close to the Nuer from this area of Jonglei. In late May 2010, a month after he began his attacks, the SPLA declared that they had ceased a deployment of forces to attempt to cordon off George’s area of operation and stop him from moving out of his base. At the time, SPLA officials claimed George was in Baliet County in Upper Nile State, due east of Malakal. The United Nations also expressed concern in May that civilians may be trapped in George’s area of operation, namely in Khorfulus County.

Rumours abound as to the sources of George’s support. In contrast to other leaders of post-election insurrections, however, George did not necessarily need 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.

The GoSS and SPLA have repeatedly alleged that George is receiving support from the Sudanese government. This is not out of the realm of possibility, but there is no evidence to support the claim. Another allegation circulating is that George had plans to link to a militia associated with Lam Akol, head of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement–Democratic Change opposition party, who ran against Salva Kiir for the Southern presidency. A third potential source of support for George may be the former South Sudan Defence Forces commanders who joined the Sudanese Armed Forces following the signing of the CPA.

Some observers suggest that George armed his supporters with weapons he helped collect during the 2006 violent disarmament attempt in Jonglei, and that he had sought to acquire more weapons during his initial assault on the SPLA base in Doleib Hill in late April 2010. While both George and Gatluak Gai, another dissident SPLA member who has launched attacks in Unity State, have made statements alleging that they are operating in coordination, it is unclear whether this is actually the case.

Although George and his forces have not directly engaged with the SPLA recently, officials from the SPLA confirm that they do not know his precise location. Perhaps the most worrisome aspect of George’s revolt is that the Southern government and army have not proven capable of containing the rebellion of one of their formerly loyal and high-ranking members. The longer the George issue remains unresolved, the more space opens for other actors with grievances against the Juba government to stir tensions in advance of and following the referendum on Southern self-determination, scheduled for January 2011.

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