

# SITUATION UPDATE

September 2023



## All Alone in the Governor's Mansion: Sarah Cleto's Travails in Western Bahr el Ghazal State

### KEY FINDINGS

- The reign of Sarah Cleto, the governor of Western Bahr el Ghazal for the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO), is in crisis, with much of the opposition elite in the state calling for her removal, despite her grassroots popularity. Attempts to replace her are running up against the complexities of Western Bahr el Ghazal's ethnic politics.
- The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) deputy governor, Joseph Zachariah Garang, is trying to emerge from out of the shadow of his patron, Rizik Zacharia Hassan, and position himself as the SPLM's likely gubernatorial candidate in elections scheduled for 2024. He has earned the ire of the SPLM party machinery, however, and alternative candidates are plotting to take the candidacy.
- Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) forces are still awaiting deployment as part of the Necessary Unified Forces, and in the meantime are consigned to cantonment sites without wages, food, or health care—many soldiers have returned to farming. This acute lack of resources has led to cracks in the SPLA-IO military hierarchy and has seen the opposition try to use checkpoints and protection rackets as a means to gain a paltry income.
- Gold mining in Raga county is more lucrative, but revenues from these operations flow into the pockets of politicians in Juba via local power brokers in the SPLM and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO). Recent attempts by the state government in Wau to obtain some control over the unregulated sector have failed.

## Context

Wau is the state capital of Western Bahr el Ghazal and the centre of the greater Bahr el Ghazal region—the wellspring of support for South Sudanese president Salva Kiir. Western Bahr el Ghazal has also long been the site of intercommunal tensions between the Fertit and Luo communities, on the one hand, and Dinka groups, on the other. These tensions became more pronounced during the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005), when the Fertit initially resisted joining the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) because they thought it was trying to advance a narrowly Dinka communitarian agenda (Thomas, 2010). In response to SPLA encroachment and looting in the area around Wau, an armed Fertit opposition group known as Qwat Salem was formed, and similar armed defence forces emerged in Raga county (Blocq, 2014; Vuylsteke, 2018). Khartoum utilized these forces in its struggle with the southern rebels until 1991, when Qwat Salem joined the SPLM/A. Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, Qwat Salem was demobilized, and a conference of the Dinka, Fertit, and Luo communities attempted to address the tensions between them.

After the signing of the CPA, however, disquiet grew among the Luo and Fertit communities, as Dinka politicians, emboldened by their prominent place in the government in Juba, attempted to obtain greater control of politics in Wau, while also bringing large herds of cattle into the Jur River area, antagonizing Luo pastoralists. In 2012, tensions came to a head following a proposal to move the administrative headquarters of Wau county away from Wau town to Baggari, 19 km to the south-west—a proposal that some Fertit thought would be a means of expanding Dinka domination in the state. The proposal led to protests in Wau and the violent repression of dissent by the security services (Amnesty International, 2013). In a speech that is still referenced today, Kiir addressed a crowd in Wau stadium on 24 December 2012, warning the people of Western Bahr el Ghazal

that he could destroy the town in an hour, while directing the Fertit to ‘go back to their place’.<sup>1</sup>

Kiir’s speech was followed by a violent crackdown on protesters; some of the Fertit who fled this assault subsequently became the core of a force that joined the SPLA-IO—initially under the command of Ashab Khamis, a former leader of Qwat Salem—once the South Sudanese civil war broke out in December 2013.<sup>2</sup> Although the war initially focused on the Greater Upper Nile area, conflict came to Western Bahr el Ghazal in 2015, when militarized cattle herders from Lakes and Warrap advanced into areas south of Wau town, destroying crops and attacking the Fertit and Luo populations. This in turn led to clashes between the SPLA and SPLA-IO, as ethnic cleavages were mapped onto political divisions (Craze, 2022b, pp. 51–52). Worse violence followed in 2015–16, when largely Dinka troops from Bahr el Ghazal launched a counter-insurgency offensive in Wau county, pillaging the areas they attacked, and killing civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Further offensives occurred in the period 2016–18.

Since the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in 2018, and the subsequent return to an administrative system of ten states in South Sudan (Small Arms Survey, 2020), Western Bahr el Ghazal has been relatively peaceful. As elsewhere in the country (Craze, 2022a), Kiir’s regime has had great success in persuading SPLA-IO commanders to defect to the government, fracturing the opposition, and establishing a firm military grip on the state, without being able to address the substantive reasons for conflict in Western Bahr el Ghazal.

## All alone in the governor’s mansion

On 4 July 2023, the SPLM chairpersons for the five areas of greater Bahr el Ghazal endorsed Salva Kiir as the party’s candidate for elections that are

1 Author interviews with Fertit commanders in the SPLA-IO, Juba, November 2019 and February 2020; author interviews with politicians in Wau, November 2019 and September 2022.

2 Author interview with Ashab Khamis, Juba, February 2020.

postulated for 2024.<sup>3</sup> Kiir thanked them for his nomination at a rally in Wau attended by a sea of red tee-shirted supporters (Radio Tamazuj, 2023b)—though these supporters were largely from greater Bahr el Ghazal’s other states, rather than from Western Bahr el Ghazal.<sup>4</sup> Prior to this, at another rally on 22 June the deputy governor—and SPLM chairperson for Western Bahr el Ghazal—Joseph Zachariah Garang had announced that those who were not loyal to the SPLM should leave the state capital, and that he wanted to see only ‘red colour’ in Wau (Radio Tamazuj, 2023a). Underneath this monochromatic show of unity, however, lay political tensions.

SPLM luminaries had gathered in Wau over the previous month to await Kiir’s return to South Sudan from South Africa. Riin Tueny Mabor, the governor of Lakes state, had arrived by land a week earlier and was received by Zachariah. Noticeably absent from the occasion was Sarah Cleto, the beleaguered SPLM-IO governor of the state, who subsequently privately reprimanded Zachariah for sidelining her, to little avail.<sup>5</sup>

When Cleto was appointed governor in June 2020, she came into power on the back of a wave of popular support: she was the only female gubernatorial appointment and comes from a prominent Fertit family. Initially, she managed to improve the relationship between the SPLA-IO and the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) and ameliorate security in the state. She retains popular support in the state.

Popular support, however, has not assuaged elite disquiet. During her term in office, Cleto has struggled. Forced to try to mediate between the SPLM and the opposition, she has increasingly become unpopular within the SPLM/A-IO, and a prominent group of party members have called for her resignation. Discontent with Cleto partly stems from her refusal to accede to the personal interests

of powerful politicians in the state; for instance, in 2021, she ordered civilians living in government-owned buildings to vacate their residences, which led to the state minister of cabinet affairs effectively countermanning the governor’s order. Those occupying government-owned buildings included important commanders and members of the political elite.<sup>6</sup>

Most fundamentally, however, discontent with Cleto comes from disappointment. Many in the SPLM/A-IO had expected that once she became governor, the opposition would control Western Bahr el Ghazal and its revenues; however, as in other states with opposition governors, Western Bahr el Ghazal is effectively under occupation.<sup>7</sup> SSPDF Division 5 is commanded by a Kiir loyalist from Gogrial, and the security services remain largely in the hands of Dinka from Bahr el Ghazal, who also have extensive commercial interests in Wau.<sup>8</sup> In addition, an acute lack of state finances has seen Western Bahr el Ghazal struggle to pay its politicians and civil servants, making it almost inevitable that Cleto would disappoint opposition cadres looking expectantly to her term in office for both political power and economic resources.

Over the last year, the SPLM/A-IO elite have increasingly not cooperated with the governor. For instance, in October 2022, Cleto replaced the SPLM-IO state secretary, Adam Naro, with Barcham Musa, one of her loyalists, but an outcry by the opposition in Western Bahr el Ghazal led SPLM/A leader Riek Machar to order Cleto to countermand the order and humiliatingly reinstate Naro. The SPLM-IO elite in the state—including Naro, Daniel Akuong, the minister of agriculture, and the commissioner of Raja county, Addison Arcangelo—are now demanding that Machar replace Cleto. She has also been in an extended stand-off with Abdullah Ujang, the commander of SPLA-IO Division 6A (detailed below).

3 Those areas are Warrap, Lakes, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and Western Bahr el Ghazal states, and the Abyei Administrative Area.

4 Author telephone interviews with those present at the rallies, July 2023.

5 Author telephone interviews with politicians in Wau, July 2023.

6 Author interview with sources in Wau, September 2022.

7 See Small Arms Survey (2023).

8 SSPDF Division 5 is the division whose administrative base is in Wau.

Among those angling to be the new governor are Emmanuel Otong—like Cleto a US citizen—a Luo who served in the Iraq war and is known to be very loyal to Machar. He has strong backing in the SPLM/A-IO, but faces structural barriers to his candidacy. Otong is from Jur River county, and from the same payam as Zachariah, the deputy governor.<sup>9</sup> His appointment would lead to complaints from those in Wau and Raga counties—and the Fertit more generally—over their lack of representation in the state government. Moreover, Machar seems insistent that Western Bahr el Ghazal have a female governor, so as to try and conform with the gender provisions of the R-ARCSS, which state that women should be appointed to 35 per cent of positions. So while Cleto's governorship is in crisis, it is not yet clear that the SPLM/A-IO political elite in the state have a candidate who could replace her.

## Baggari blues

The primary source of the tension between the SPLA-IO and Cleto lies in the R-ARCSS' still incomplete security sector reform (SSR) process. While a first batch of the Necessary Unified Forces required by the agreement was graduated in Wau in November 2022, it has not been deployed, and SPLA-IO troops at cantonment sites remain without wages, health care, or sufficient food. Many have now left these sites and returned to farming. They feel betrayed by a peace agreement that has given them no solace.

In the absence of any meaningful SSR process, Kiir's regime has—as elsewhere in the country—successfully persuaded opposition commanders to defect to the government. Most notably, Joseph Arop, once the deputy division commander of SPLA-IO Division 6A, switched his support to the government in February 2020, after the intercession of the National Security Service (NSS) and Angelo Taban, the former governor of Wau state (Craze, 2020, pp. 71–75).<sup>10</sup> In recent

months Arop's forces have been deployed on the Busseri road leading to the SPLA-IO military headquarters in Baggari, effectively functioning as a buffer force. As with other such forces (such as James Ochan Puot's force in Maiwut county), Arop's men are not integrated into the SSPDF, but rather receive monthly lump sum payments from the Office of the President, along with fuel and other supplies, ensuring that they have a direct relationship with the coterie around Kiir.<sup>11</sup>

One of the reasons for Arop's defection was his discontent with Abdullah Ujang, who was named division commander of SPLA-IO Division 6A after Khamis was appointed to the Joint Defence Board. This discontent originates from long-standing disagreements between Khamis and Ujang. According to Vuylsteke (2018), although both men are Balanda Fertit, they come from different parts of the state, and the Balanda of Baggari—from where Khamis hails—feel they have sacrificed more for the struggle and thus should be in charge. In an interview, Khamis himself, however, offered a more prosaic reason for his dispute with Ujang: the latter man had an extant area of control that he was reluctant to give up to Khamis and Arop.<sup>12</sup> Ujang established two checkpoints on the road from Wau to Tombura that provided revenue in the absence of the payment of wages. With the SSR process continually being delayed, however, there was growing discontent among his forces over the amount of this revenue Ujang was keeping for himself. In March 2023, his troops effectively mutinied, and Ujang was taken to Juba, where he remains: not in detention, but not free to return to Western Bahr el Ghazal.

In a situation of brutal austerity, with neither an SSR process nor Machar providing wages for the SPLA-IO, opposition soldiers are attempting to find resources where they can. On 6 June 2023, for instance, some SPLA-IO troops arrested the head of the Women Training and Promotion programme at the Bringi

9 South Sudanese administrative units run from the state, to the county, to the payam, and then to the boma (from largest to smallest).

10 The SPLA-IO forces in Western Bahr el Ghazal are structured in a sector (Sector 7) with two divisions: 6A for Wau and 6B for Raja, each headed by a division commander. In the cited reference, Joseph Arop is referred to as Joseph Dongo.

11 For a discussion of Ochan, see Craze (2022a).

12 Author interview with Ashab Khamis, Juba, February 2020.

checkpoint in Wau and demanded a 10 per cent cut of the USD 49,000 the programme had received for a school development project.<sup>13</sup> Ujang's replacement, Tobia Felverto Uryam, a former soldier in the Sudanese army and a former member of Omar al-Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP), has promised financial transparency in such matters.

Underneath the discontent with Ujang was a sense that Baggari is not seeing as much development as Wau and Jur River county. Ujang refused to allow the Wau county commissioner, George Tonga, to visit the area until the completion of the SSR process, despite an order from Cleto for the commissioner to stay in Baggari. While this is the mainline SPLA-IO position, some in the movement blamed Ujang for blocking development in the area and for rejecting the relocation of the administrative headquarters of Wau county to Baggari—the same controversial issue that inflamed violence in 2012. Those who were critical of Ujang hoped such a relocation would enable development in Baggari; others feared it would allow further SPLM domination of Fertit areas traditionally opposed to the regime in Juba.

## Dilemmas of the southern intellectuals

Zachariah was appointed deputy governor in July 2021. A Luo from Jur River, he is from a prominent SPLM family: his father, Joseph Garang, is the author of the famous 1971 essay, 'The Dilemma of the Southern Intellectual: Is It Justified?' (Garang, 2010). Zachariah's appointment was partly intended as a way for Kiir to show that he remains loyal to the original dream of John Garang—who led the SPLM/A until his death in 2005—despite the appointments of so many cadres from the NCP to the SPLM Political Bureau in recent years. Zachariah was further intended to be a placeholder, who could take the job for six months at the behest of his political patron, the former governor of Western Bahr el Ghazal and the power broker in the state, Rizik Zacharia Hassan,

before stepping aside for someone more suited to the state's ethnic electoral calculus.

Zachariah's task was to organize the SPLM for forthcoming elections, while ensuring that Cleto remained relatively powerless. Zachariah carried out both tasks with aplomb, and despite the wishes of his patron, is now trying to position himself to be the SPLM's gubernatorial candidate for Western Bahr el Ghazal. He is unlikely to be successful. Zachariah is from Jur River county (Udici payam), and Kiir has long believed that the Luo of Jur River will throw their weight in with the SPLM in order to influence politics in Wau, regardless of who the gubernatorial candidate is. In the ruling regime's calculations, it is the Fertit population of the state who need convincing that they should support the SPLM, and who still remember the violence meted out to them by government forces from 2012 to 2018. Thus, all the rumours in Wau swirl around potential Fertit politicians to replace Zachariah and become the SPLM gubernatorial candidate, with pole position being given to Viola Alexander Umili, the SPLM state secretary-general, a Fertit politician who comes from a popular family in Wau.

Underlying this game of thrones is a map of less changeable ethnic realities. At present, the positions of state governor, deputy governor, and speaker of the assembly are informally divided up between, respectively, the counties of Wau (Cleto), Jur River (Zachariah), and Raga (the speaker of the assembly, Muhameden Abubaker). If Emmanuel Otong—like Zachariah, a native of Jur River—is brought in to replace Cleto, then Zachariah will almost certainly have to leave the deputy governorship, with rumours that it will be another Rizik protégé, the speaker, Abubaker, who will take the deputy governorship, leaving the speakership to a Balanda Fertit politician from Wau. The smart money in the state capital is on Angelo Taban, the former governor and a Kiir loyalist, becoming speaker. This is just one potential scenario: the list of candidates is long, and many other potential

<sup>13</sup> Author telephone interview with source in Wau, July 2023.

scenarios are produced by the complexity of Western Bahr el Ghazal's ethnic make-up.

## The golden boy

Tensions have long simmered in Raga county over the activities of the SPLM-IO county commissioner, Addison Arcangelo. In January 2023, the SPLM party secretary in the county, Awad Ismail, ordered the SSPDF commander to disarm Arcangelo's bodyguards after the commissioner indicated his concern about Ismail's mobilization efforts in the county, which remains an SPLM/A-IO stronghold. At the root of these tensions is Arcangelo's role in the gold trade in Boro Medina and elsewhere in the county. Artisanal gold mining in the state is largely unregulated, as elsewhere in South Sudan (Hunter and Opala, 2023), and revenue from such mining bypasses the state government in Wau.

On 7 January 2023, the state parliament summoned two state ministers and Arcangelo to Wau to answer questions about gold mining, after apparently receiving complaints from chiefs in Boro Medina that foreigners were mining in the area at the behest of the commissioner. On 11 January, the state assembly issued a directive confining Arcangelo to Wau until an investigation was finalized, leading to complaints from Raga town. Although an investigative committee visited Boro Medina, the investigation itself soon ran into bigger issues.

Informal gold mining in Boro Medina is organized through a collection of local power brokers, including the popular SPLA-IO commander of Division 6B, Musa Dakumi, as well as Arcangelo, and members of the SSPDF and NSS. These figures function as brokers for powerful politicians in Juba, including, reportedly, members of Kiir's family, Rizik Zachariah Hassan (still the most important politician from Raga), and Akol Koor Kuc, the director general of the NSS. For Kiir's regime—and the patrimonial machine that it relies on to survive—it is essential that as much income remains off the books as possible. Thus a shadow state administration has been created comprising figures with state power, but engaged in private relations of resource extraction and self-enrichment. The miners working

for these shadowy figures include Darfuris from Sudan, South Sudanese, and Congolese civilians with experience of mining.

This machine of private patrimonial politics, underwritten by national state power, is the true engine of politics in South Sudan, against which the protestations of the parliament in Wau are relatively powerless. After the finalization of the investigatory committee's report, Arcangelo was allowed to return to Raga county, and mining operations continued as before.

## Conclusion

This Situation Update has surveyed three different levels of power politics in Western Bahr el Ghazal.

First, in the unending wars of position currently being fought in preparation for elections, both the SPLM-IO and SPLM are dominated by power struggles between rival figures. Second, these struggles play out over an ethnic cartography formed by the violent ruptures and contentions of the South Sudanese civil war, and the second Sudanese civil war before it. These ruptures include long-standing Fertit anger over their marginalization by Dinka military and political elites, and resentment from Luo populations over Dinka pastoralists' behaviour in the Jur River area. Third, such ruptures are not long-standing, essentialist ethnic differences between groups, but the product of the politicization of ethnicity by a predatory patrimonial political economy that relies on the displacement of people, the exploitation of resources, and the fragmentation of potential opposition blocs. It is this third level of power politics that is the real driving force of tensions in Western Bahr el Ghazal, as elsewhere in South Sudan.

In such a context, it is not important who the next governor of Western Bahr el Ghazal is. Rather, what is crucial is that the state will remain under occupation: the SSPDF and NSS command structures are comprised of government loyalists recruited outside the state, a situation that ensures the continued economic dominance of chosen business and

political elites close to the president, who benefit from Wau's recent economic growth. They also obtain revenue from gold mined in Raga county, which goes directly to Juba and into the pockets of politicians connected to the president rather than to the people of Boro Medina, who continue to be dominated, and not represented, by Kiir's regime. ●

## Abbreviations and acronyms

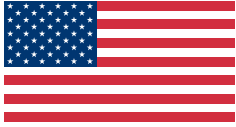
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>NCP</b>	National Congress Party
<b>NSS</b>	National Security Service
<b>R-ARCSS</b>	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
<b>SPLA/IO</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition
<b>SPLM/A</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
<b>SPLM/A-IO</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement Army-in-Opposition
<b>SSPDF</b>	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
<b>SSR</b>	Security sector reform
<b>USD</b>	United States dollar

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