

Treason trial of South Sudan's Vice President threatens to reignite civil war

Kipchumba Ochieng
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On Monday, the treason trial of First Vice President Riek Machar opened. It followed a bloody weekend in which at least 48 people were killed and more than 150 wounded in clashes between government forces and opposition fighters of Machar in the northeastern border town of Burebiey.

According to state officials, Machar's forces from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) attacked a government base but were repelled by the South Sudan People's Defense Forces.

The SPLM-IO, formed after the December 2013 massacres of Nuer civilians in Juba, is the armed and political movement representing Machar's core power base. Though formally folded into the 2018 "unity government," the SPLM-IO continues to operate as a parallel military-political force.

Last week its leadership issued a statement calling for "regime change," accusing President Salva Kiir of turning South Sudan into a dictatorship after Machar was dismissed and charged with treason over an alleged assault in Nasir in March that killed more than 250 soldiers. Soon after, Machar was suspended as vice president and placed under house arrest in Juba. The SPLM/IO denounced the charges as "fabricated."

Nasir, on the Ethiopian border, is a strategic stronghold for Machar's Nuer supporters. The Nuer, the second-largest ethnic group after the Dinka, form a significant portion of the population in Upper Nile and Jonglei. Traditionally pastoralist cattle herders, the Nuer have clashed with neighbours, particularly the Dinka, over grazing lands, conflicts deepened by colonial divide-and-rule and post-independence elites.

In 1991, Machar broke with John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in Nasir, forming his own faction and plunging the movement into internecine warfare that left thousands dead, including the Bor massacre of some 2,000 Dinkas.

President Salva Kiir has relied heavily on fighters from his Dinka base, the country's largest ethnic group. These forces formed the backbone of the Sudan People's Liberation

Army (SPLA) and, after independence, the national army. Kiir has consistently leaned on Dinka militias and commanders to secure his rule, reinforcing ethnic divisions.

Machar's trial has shattered the fragile 2018 peace agreement that ended five years of civil war in which 400,000 people were killed, rape was wielded as a weapon of war, famine deliberately inflicted, and more than four million displaced. It recalls the eruption of conflict in December 2013, when President Kiir dismissed Machar as vice president and sacked his entire cabinet, consolidating near-dictatorial powers under the presidency. By purging Machar and other Nuer representatives from government, Kiir transformed a political power struggle into an ethnic confrontation, unleashing massacres in Juba and driving the country into a full-scale civil war.

South Sudan emerged from the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Sudanese government of Omar al-Bashir and the SPLM. Under US pressure, Khartoum conceded to a referendum on independence in 2011, in which 99 percent of Southerners voted to secede. Western media hailed the "birth of freedom," with US President Obama declaring "an inspiring step forward in Africa's long journey toward democracy and justice."

France's Pabloite New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) joined in. Its Africa writer Paul Martial wrote that "the new state is likely to be quickly confronted with terrible difficulties... but the newfound freedom and the dynamics of revolution in the Arab countries can change many things."

The referendum was the product of decades of intrigue in which Washington and its allies nurtured the SPLM as a proxy force against Khartoum. As the WSWs warned in 2011, "the referendum has nothing to do with self-determination, peace or democracy. It is dictated by the efforts of the United States to gain strategic advantage in relation to China, which dominates the Sudanese oil industry." Its aim was "the creation of a puppet state... the separation of the south will only perpetuate religious and ethnic conflict, with the most likely outcome being a resumption of warfare."

Two years later, as the SPLM fractured and the country descended into war, the WWSWS concluded, “partition has produced yet another unviable state, ruled over by warring factions beholden to one or other major power, bringing nothing but hardship to all but a tiny layer in Juba.”

Since independence, South Sudan’s elite has plundered billions. A UN investigation, *Plundering a Nation*, exposed how oil revenues—\$25.2 billion since 2011, including \$8 billion since 2018—were siphoned into patronage networks tied to Kiir and Machar. Health spending in 2024 was just \$7.9 million for 12 million people, less than was allocated to the men’s national basketball team, while the Presidential Medical Unit, serving only Kiir and his circle, received more than the entire national health system. GDP has collapsed to a quarter of pre-independence levels.

The consequences have been catastrophic. South Sudan ranks second-to-last in global health coverage. One in ten children dies before the age of five, three-quarters from preventable illnesses. Maternal mortality is the world’s highest. Life expectancy has stagnated at 55 years. Two-thirds of the population face acute food insecurity, including 2.3 million acutely malnourished children and 1.2 million women. Entire regions teeter on famine.

This looting is intrinsic to the state created by imperialist partition. A rentier economy based on oil and foreign aid sustains a parasitic elite whose survival depends on plunder and armed factions.

South Sudan’s descent into civil war is part of a wider regional breakdown. To the north, Sudan’s civil war, raging for two years, has killed tens of thousands, displaced 12 million internally, and driven 4 million abroad.

In Ethiopia, the two-year war with the Tigray People’s Liberation Front ended in 2022 after hundreds of thousands of deaths and mass displacement. Armed clashes persist in Oromia and Amhara, while Egypt is whipping up tensions against Ethiopia over its Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

In Somalia, Al Shabab continues its insurgency, while Somaliland negotiates with Ethiopia for sea access and with Washington to host Palestinians expelled from Gaza in exchange for state recognition.

To the south, Kenya has been convulsed by protests against austerity and collapsing living standards, met with murderous repression.

The catastrophe in South Sudan is the culmination of over a century of imperialist depredation, and the betrayals carried out by every faction of the national bourgeoisie. Colonial rule concentrated resources in the north around Khartoum while leaving the south in backwardness. This laid the groundwork for resentment and two ruinous civil wars.

The Khartoum elite oscillated between alliances with

Washington, Moscow and Beijing, but the state remained a bulwark of capitalist rule. US military aid poured into Sudan in the 1970s to counter Soviet influence in neighbouring Ethiopia and Libya, before relations collapsed in the 1980s. When President Nimeiry imposed Islamic law in 1983, sparking the Second Civil War, Washington shifted its support to the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its military wing, the SPLA.

Despite employing socialist rhetoric, the SPLM was a nationalist movement led by US-trained John Garang, whose programme was limited to securing a share of Sudan’s oil wealth for a southern elite. Backed by Washington, Tel Aviv and Kampala, the SPLM was armed and financed as a proxy to weaken Khartoum and undermine Chinese influence. Israel saw the SPLM as part of its regional strategy to undermine hostile Arab states and secure access to the Red Sea.

As Beijing emerged as Sudan’s main economic partner in the 1990s and 2000s, controlling 75 percent of oil production, Washington accelerated its drive to split the country. Secession in 2011 stripped Khartoum of three-quarters of its oil reserves, leaving the new state dependent and unviable.

Stalinism facilitated these betrayals. The Sudanese Communist Party, once one of the strongest in Africa, subordinated workers and peasants to alliances with bourgeois nationalists, joining Nimeiry’s regime in 1969 only to be destroyed the following year. Across Africa, Stalinist and Maoist-backed parties tied themselves to the manoeuvres of the Soviet bureaucracy and Beijing, blocking socialist revolution in the name of a “national democratic revolution” and clearing the path for imperialist domination through corrupt local elites.

The history of Sudan and South Sudan confirms the central tenet of Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution: in countries of belated capitalist development, the bourgeoisie is incapable of fulfilling the democratic or national tasks of liberation. Bound to imperialism, it rules through repression, ethnic manipulation and plunder. Only the working class, leading the oppressed masses, can carry through these tasks as part of the international fight for socialism. The creation of new nation states under capitalism only paves the way to warlordism, kleptocracy and imperialist dependency. The bloody fate of South Sudan tragically demonstrates this truth.



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