Civil war on a shoestring: rebellion in South Sudan’s Equatoria region

Nicki Kindersley, Cardiff University
Øystein H. Rolandsen, Peace Research Institute Oslo

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ABSTRACT

This article is a case study of armed opposition factions in the Central Equatoria region within South Sudan’s current civil war. Based on research in South Sudan and northern Uganda during the spring of 2017, the study focuses on the internal organisation, recruitment and funding processes, and political ideas of these organisations, engaging with recent theories concerning governance and civilians in rebel controlled territories. It argues that rebels and civilians are not separate analytical categories, and that the region’s new wartime orders are embedded in common local knowledge drawn from historical practice.

Keywords: South Sudan; Uganda; insurgency; rebel governance; mobilisation

1 Corresponding author: ndk25@cam.ac.uk. School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University, Museum Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3AX, UK; +44 2920 876 705.
2 oystein.rolandsen@prio.org. Peace Research Institute Oslo, Hausmanns gate 3, 0186 Oslo, Norway; +47 22 54 77 00.
INTRODUCTION

This article addresses armed groups’ practices of governance in civil wars, and the way in which these groups gain legitimacy among people living in the areas they control. As a point of departure we examine the spread of organised violence in South Sudan over the last two years, and specifically the emerging factions of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement ‘In Opposition’ (SPLM-IO) operating in the central Equatoria region. In this area bordering northern Uganda and north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) there has been a rapid escalation of violence since mid-2016 manifested in the actions of a bewildering plethora of government security branches, militias, rebel outfits and local protection groups. Fragmentation on both the government side and within the armed opposition is characteristic of a civil war which has, since its beginning in December 2013, gradually spread to most parts of Africa’s newest state. Fighting between the warring parties, as well as a state of permanent insecurity across the region, has compounded a deep economic crisis and an unravelling of what was from the outset a weak and authoritarian government structure. It has however not been possible for the rebels to take advantage of the government’s extreme fragility because of a lack of foreign support. This entrenched military standoff, with smaller skirmishes and revenge cycles, has deepened the region’s humanitarian crisis.

But this violent crisis is not antithetical to organised systems of governance. Based on a close study of the civil war in central Equatoria, we have observed emergent local systems of order in this context in which it is difficult to distinguish between ‘formal’ and ‘rebel’ modes of governance. As in the rest of South Sudan, in central Equatoria the SPLM-IO is fragmented and ridden by infighting, while the government branches at the state level and locally have ceased to operate as bureaucratic units or providers of services. These have become personalised local fiefdoms where various branches of the army and security services compete for dominance and the right to taxation and plunder. Nevertheless, as the conflict draws out, the combatants and the rest of the population settles into a set of wartime modi operandi. Makeshift systems of wartime governance become increasingly institutionalised and networks of information and transportation solidifies. These networks are transnational as both the government and the various rebel outfits rely on collaboration with South Sudanese in the towns and camps of north-western Uganda, which harbour hundreds of thousands of refugees. We trace how the IO insurgency, and its various armed groups and organisers, developed their current organisation from established ‘state’ institutions, political associations and personal vendettas and collaborations that date back well before the conflagration in Juba in July 2016. In seeking to evidence this, we aim to emphasise the multi-layered nature of the rebel movements in the central Equatoria area as they began to develop governance systems in December 2016 and early 2017.

We then move to the revived focus of political science on rebel governance and legitimacy. In this literature, from an instrumental perspective, insurgents need to legitimise their use of violence to maintain order in occupied areas as well as to justify appropriation of recruits, labour and supplies (Schlichte and Scheneckener 2015), and the agency of local populations in manipulating and shaping insurgencies (Kalyvas 2006, Arjona 2016). This scholarship would push us to ask: how have rebels in central Equatoria sought legitimacy and purchase locally? We see this as a possibly misleading question: it implies that central Equatoria (and the refugee camps of northern Uganda) is a political marketplace for government agencies and rebel groups competing for the backing of recruits or a civilian population. This

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3 For convenience, we refer here to the former Central Equatoria state area, rather than the multiple new states created in the region in December 2015.
simplifies and de-historicises a more complex process of support for, and normalisation of, armed group order. Here, we argue that all governance in central Equatoria (whether ‘IO’ or other armed groups, including the militarised administration of the South Sudan government) is based on deep historical practice and experience of working within long-running, low-intensity civil wars.

We use the case of the central Equatoria factions – and their organisers’ and fighters’ personal histories – to illustrate the importance of examining genealogies of practice, common local knowledge, and personal work experience in understanding the institutionalisation of armed group governance systems. We note that the most ‘successful’ factions of the area’s armed groups, who operate with very limited financial backing, have seized on norms and longer histories of legitimate action and organisation in war that are underpinned by their own experience and personal backgrounds, as well as basic local knowledge about civil war survival and management. Rebel knowledge of local topography and society is not just immediately practical for insurgent logistics. Localised rebel movements can draw on historical knowledge of commonly understood and normative forms of organisation in times of conflict; these practices and norms carry their own legitimacy as assumed ways of working in war.

This approach builds on a foundation from anthropology and area studies, and the micro-dynamics of local governance and social relations during conflict (Clapham 1982, Kriger 1992, Humphreys and Weinstein 2008, Rolandsen 2011, Debos 2016). Parallels can be drawn to the eastern DRC, as outlined in recent work by Kristof Titeca. With Rens Twijnstra, he explores the institutional bricolage of a rebellion that, without significant external support, is relying heavily on local histories of insurgent and extra-state order (Twijnstra and Titeca 2016). If we then understand the notion of bricolage as the practise of cobbling together a set of heterogeneous approaches to politics, governance and indeed warfare, this might be the most accurate way of portraying both government and rebel approaches to controlling territories and populations in central Equatoria. To justify and explain their actions, military and political leaders as well as organisers at the grassroots level may draw upon a plethora of practical norms and political interpretations laid down by generations of rebel, self-defence and local governance institutions. As Titeca (2017, p. 1) observes, wartime understandings (and thus actions) are ‘embedded in existing frameworks of interpretation’ based on multi-generational narratives of resistance and organisation; this includes but extends well beyond the former SPLM/A orders and ideas of the last civil war.

This demands the question of how to draw a line between the normative categories of civilians and combatants, who – in this civil war as in many others – are often from the same family. If then many of these rebel actors are drawing on governmental experience, this article further supports the point made in this special issue: that in these circumstances of repeated civil war and weak state institutions, it is often impossible, and maybe not even valuable, to attempt to differentiate civilians and rebels or where local government structures/officials and rebel organisations begin and end. We suggest instead a search for commonalities and continuities.

Our study of the growing shape of the central Equatoria borderland rebel movement is based on recent research in Juba, South Sudan, and in northern Uganda over February to May 2017. It draws on around sixty informal interviews and discussions with some of the various IO factions’ commanders, political spokespersons, supporters, financial backers, refugee camp liaisons, recruiters and trainers in northern Uganda, as well as with camp residents, ex-
politicians, church leaders and refugee humanitarian workers from the Central Equatoria region. We supplemented this work with interviews with politicians, aid agencies, church and civil society workers in Juba. This article is therefore a snapshot case study of a growing insurgency, aimed primarily at expanding the scope of analysis of local organisation in rebel movements. It opens a window into an emergent rebel order’s opportunities, plans, aims and actions that are otherwise often lost to study.

COLLAPSE AND CONFLICT: THE FRAGMENTATION OF ORDER IN THE CENTRAL EQUATORIA REGION, 2016-2017

The rapid spread of the civil war in South Sudan in July 2016 is a further point of rupture in South Sudan’s recent history. The political conflict is rooted in longstanding grievances including over government representation, repression, militia organisation, land expropriation, and unconstitutional actions within the ruling party Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and Army (SPLA), and by the SPLM-dominated government and presidency. Tensions initially came to a head on 15 December 2013, when a political power struggle between factions headed by Salva Kiir and his vice-president Riek Machar sparked fighting among SPLA soldiers in a Juba barracks, which spread to the military headquarters. Massacres in Juba soon descended into civil war, which was paused but not stopped or solved by a power-sharing agreement brokered between the begrudging parties in August 2015. Kiir’s government continued to use divide and rule strategies to refashion the peace deal, including re-partitioning the country into 28 states from ten, exacerbating a crisis of local governance.

Fighting between the parties were paused at around new year 2016 and in April Riek Machar arrived in Juba and was reinstated as Vice-President. He arrived with a detachment of rebel soldiers, which were outmanned and outgunned by the government forces present in the capital. The UN Mission in South Sudan had no capacity or mandate to go between or regulate the operation of these forces. The forming of a joint transitional government did not bring an immediate solution to the deep economic problems facing the broken country. Tensions rose again between the factions and was manifested in skirmishes at checkpoints between soldiers from the different factions. A shoot-out between the Riek Machar’s and Salva Kiir’s bodyguards on 8 July resulted in purge of the outnumbered SPLM-IO forces from the city. Riek Machar and the rebel soldiers made a dramatic flight from Juba through Central and Western Equatoria to the border of DRC.

Although the August 2015 peace agreement was not officially declared dead after the events in July 2016, the civil war re-ignited and spread to other regions of the country and resulted in a general deterioration of central government control. Salva Kiir’s government continues to pursue military offensives on multiple fronts, using an army that is reduced to a collection of militias and a sprawling national security apparatus, against rebels united only ‘In Opposition’. The expanding opposition to Kiir’s regime is supposedly under the overall leadership of Riek Machar, who has been under house arrest in South Africa since July 2016. But the IO is ultimately fragmented and factional, an umbrella arrangement in (so far) unofficial coalition with myriad other personal militias and ‘opposition parties’. A case in point is the National Salvation Front which was set up by the recently defected Thomas Cirillo, former SPLA Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics (HSBA 2017). On all sides, control of the fighting forces and their local commanders is decentralised to a level bordering autonomy and it is difficult for the leaders at the national level to plan and coordinate their
activities. This is particularly a problem for Riek Machar who is deprived of three central pillars of rebel leadership: travel to rebel controlled areas, representing the rebels in international settings and finding foreign patronage (Rolandsen 2015, Schomerus and Rigterink 2016, Allison 2017).

These dramatic events at the national level give the impression of sudden transitions from peace to war and back again, but studies of organised violence in Africa have demonstrated that these changes may not be as clear-cut as news headlines indicate (Debos 2016). Furthermore, the shift from formal state to ‘rebel’ governance might not be such a fundamental change as is often assumed. During the last civil war in South Sudan (1983-2005) the SPLM/A governance of areas under its control mirrored that of the Government of Sudan – which in turn had inherited central elements of administrative apparatus from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899-1956) (Rolandsen 2005). These included a hierarchy of chiefs’ courts dealing with crime and local conflict resolution, reporting to a government appointed representative – often an army officer or a person with military background – who had a local security force and a rudimentary bureaucracy at his disposal (always a he). Public works were carried out by prisoners and through forced labour (as ‘taxation’). Social services were provided by foreign entities (mainly missionaries and NGOs). Seen from the perspective of political leaders and rebel commanders since the colonial period, the main benefit of this system is that it is cheap and requires only a minimum of follow-up from the central level. The losers were those governed, who were stuck in a violent and authoritarian system of governance with limited prospects of change.

The recent history of the shifting administrations of Central Equatoria region is an example of this blurring of the peace-war dichotomy and the inter-changeability of ‘official’ and ‘rebel’ governance. The South Sudan government’s violent securitisation of western and central Equatoria regions from 2014 to 2016 incited a growing insurrection. In 2014 and 2015, armed opposition groups and guerrilla gangs were already operating in Mundri, Lainya and Ombasi (opposition spokesperson, int. 25 February 2017). These groups were staging larger-scale raids since early 2016: including ambushes on cars and convoys in Lainya, Tore, and around Kajo Keji, and on market days in Mugwo and Otogo. Hundreds of people were displaced from Lainya and Mundri into makeshift refugee camps in the centre of Yei. Following President Salva Kiir’s declaration of the subdivision of the three Equatorias into eight states – a move that many residents felt was aimed to undermine Equatorian cooperation and political power – he appointed David Lokonga Moses as Yei River State Governor in December 2015 (Radio Tamazuj 2015). Lokonga’s arrival coincided with the intensification of censorship in Yei (Radio Tamazuj 2016a). Journalists and radio stations suffered daily intimidation and harassment from security organs.

Around April 2016, large numbers of poorly-trained Mathiang Anyoor forces poured into the state. These were SPLA irregulars recruited since 2013 particularly from Northern Bahr el Ghazal and were specifically to protect the pro-Kiir governor and assist him in rooting out ‘suspected IO’ in the area (refugee aid worker, int. 27 February 2017). The Mathiang Anyoor forces caused conflict within Yei’s existing security and military forces. They were responsible for violence against civilians, including raids on markets, rapes by soldiers, and ‘disappearance’ of dozens of people (particularly young men), arbitrary detention and torture of locals (Radio Tamazuj 2016b). This security crackdown compounded the impact of a deep economic crisis which had caused hardship for the people of Central Equatoria ever since South Sudan decided to shut down oil production in January 2012 (brought partly back online in March 2013). The Greater Equatoria region is in general more self-sufficient than other
parts of South Sudan, but it is still dependent on imports from abroad for supplying everything except basic food stuffs. Since South Sudan exports almost nothing except oil, the loss of oil revenues resulted in a hyperinflation and massive trade deficit. Government employees did not receive salaries, and due to the civil war most of the foreign aid agencies rolled back their long-term development projects and left a skeleton staff for handing out relief aid. The confluence of economic hardship and indiscriminate violence by government forces precipitated rearmament and increasing numbers of young men joining armed groups and banditry in rural areas, in patterns that are replicated across South Sudan.

THE BRICOLAGE OF ORGANIZED VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL EQUATORIA

From July 2016 violence escalated in the Yei area. In the immediate aftermath of the Juba clashes, some local rebels in Yei area initiated small-scale attacks in Ombasi and Mugwo areas, against local military barracks (Radio Tamazuj 2016c). At the same time, after their expulsion from Juba in July, Riek Machar and SPLA-IO allies fled south through areas around Lanya, Ye, Mundri and Morobo, into the Democratic Republic of Congo. Pro-Kiir SPLA troops pursued Machar and his cohort across central and western parts of Equatoria; during this manhunt, some Equatorian militias and rebel groups allegedly helped to defend Machar, and some Nuer SPLA-IO remained behind with these groups (International Crisis Group 2016). Governor Lokonga reported attacks on an SPLA checkpoint and a government military convoy at Mitika in Lasu Payam, on the village of Rasol, within Yei town (an incident killing four people) and in Lainya County (Radio Tamazuj 2016e, 2016f). In retaliation, when returning the government soldiers went on a rampage starting at Yei central hospital, killing a reported 4 civilians in a sweep of the town that allegedly targeted the houses of local elders and other Yei personalities (Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2016; IO member, int. 7 March 2017; former politician, int. 25 February 2017).

Many residents moved outside Yei and Lainya after these attacks (Radio Tamazuj 2016d). In August, after Lokonga accused Yei’s motorbike taxi drivers and other youth groups of supporting the IO, more young men left the town and joined rebel groups (IO combatant, int. 7 March 2017). In Yei town, uniformed men burnt the neighbourhoods of Lutaya Dem and Supiri; a soldier reportedly told a resident that ‘this place is only for rebels’ (HRW 2016). Several people, including a former clerk at the county high court, were detained (Radio Tamazuj 2016g; UN News 2016). Governor Lokonga later declared a no-go area five miles beyond Yei town boundaries, reportedly called ‘condemned areas’. Defections of local government officials to SPLM-IO followed, including the above mentioned Yei River County Commissioner Bidali Cosmas Wori-Kojo; the Deputy Governor of Yei River State, Abraham Wani; and at least a dozen other officials, bodyguards and workers (VOA 2016; Radio Tamazuj 2016h).

During the autumn of 2016 and early 2017, the IO in Central Equatoria were created through a process of bricolage: the existing local angry youths’ militias were subsumed into various commanders’ factions. In July 2016, in the wake of Riek’s flight overland to DRC, these organic ‘IO’ armed groups were supplemented by some of Riek’s forces. John Jok Gai, former head of the SPLA-IO police units in Juba and a Nuer officer, was appointed by Riek as Central Equatoria sector commander, replacing the former Equatorian IO political leader Peter Abdel Rahman Sule, who had gone missing in Uganda in previous months. John Mabieh Gar also remained behind as commander of Yei River State IO (HSBA 2017, p. 4). These individuals, who both fled with Riek from Juba in July 2016, joined with other local
commanders in Western and Central Equatoria over the following months, including Moses Kujo Gabriel in the Kajo Keji area, and Joseph Yatte in the Yei area – challenging (if not disproving) a common image of the IO as Nuer-dominated (IO spokesperson, interview 25 February 2017). IO forces in Central Equatoria have been further bolstered by small detachments loyal to other Equatorian leaders, for instance members of former Mundari militias from around Juba (refugee politician, 25 February 2017); and most notably from Martin Kenyi’s IO faction operating around Nimule, after Kenyi’s death during the flight from Juba (IO combatant, int. 3 March 2017).

By the end of 2016, armed groups in Central Equatoria began to capture more territory, including rural areas around Ombasi and Morobo; Lasu town and SPLA base fell on 4 December (HSBA 2017, p. 13; refugee priest, int. 6 March 2017). The rebels then established several new headquarters across the border regions of the state, near Lasu towards the DRC border, at Goja, only 9 miles from Yei, and at Morsa, 2 miles from Ombasi. IO forces had effectively cut off the Kaya border post, and repeatedly occupied suburbs of the border town Kajo Keji. On 8 January, area rebels declared that they had captured Morobo County (Sudan Tribune, 8 January 2017). Many refugees reported that the IO groups they have met were well-disciplined, and had a good relationship with local residents, in part because they are often from the local area (ex-NGO worker, int. 26 February 2017). In March, spokespersons of the IO in the northern Ugandan town of Arua claimed they represented a united movement, and they were apparently well-connected to information and contacts with the SPLM-IO in Upper Nile and further afield; they also reported the presence of active Nuer commanders in Equatoria, and Equatorian forces in Upper Nile (IO spokesperson, int. 4 March 2017). But this organisation is undermined by divisions and differences of aim and strategy among commanders.

In December 2016, regional rebel leaders held a conference within their liberated territory, which the Shilluk IO commander Johnson Olony reportedly attended, to address the rapid growth and organisation of the IO in Central Equatoria. Resolutions included the reconstitution and reorganisation of command structures, which reportedly began on 2 January 2017. Administrative units, including logistics, finance, and intelligence corps, were re-organised (IO combatant, int. 3 March 2017). A series of high-level meetings with defected SPLA commanders followed, including with Thomas Cirillo in Kampala in January 2017; with the former deputy governor of Yei River State, Abraham Wani, in April 2017; and between IO John Jok Gai and Cirillo in Addis Ababa on 9 March (Nyamilepedia, 2017). These meetings ostensibly set up lines of command, a regional administration, intelligence and logistics units, with named divisions, brigades and battalions. Training camps were established (IO combatant, int. 3 March 2017). Many refugees report that these ‘IO’ are organised, well-disciplined, and have a good relationship with local residents, in part because they are often from the area (refugee NGO worker, 26 February 2017). The defection of Thomas Cirilo in January 2017 complicated loyalties in Central Equatoria. Cirilo visited Kampala in January, holding a series of meetings including with elders and advisors from the Yei region (refugee priest, int. 6 March 2017). His announcement of a new movement, the National Salvation Front (NSF), came as an apparent surprise to many recruiters and allies of the rebel forces in Central Equatoria, and has divided opinion (refugee camp committee, int. 28 February 2017; IO combatant, 7 March 2017).

Detached from the machinations of the various leaders and commanders at a national level, regional commands, recruitment and orders of this umbrella IO have been flourishing and shifting. The areas’ multiple factions have been embedding and institutionalising themselves
over the early months of 2017, both within strongholds around Lasu and Ombasi and within refugee camps and communities in Uganda. More recent splits and factions have undermined the opposition front in Central Equatoria. A National Resistance Front/Army was declared by Cosmas Bidali Wori-Kojo and other ex-Yei River State officials on 4 January 2017; Bidali states he is separate from Riek Machar’s IO (Radio Tamazuj 2017). Forces are also led by some members of militias from previous civil wars, and from other areas, including militias from Martin Kenyi’s faction from Eastern Equatoria (refugee politician, int. 25 February 2017; IO combatant, 3 March 2017). During 2017, several IO officers defected to Cirillo’s National Salvation Front/Army (abbreviated as NAS), sparking clashes between NAS and IO forces. But all these various factions have found significant popular support, recruits and supplies through local legitimacy and connections. To one civil-military organiser within the Ombasi-area IO, the Equatoria region has its own structure, ‘we command our forces’; while Riek Machar is ‘considered’ leader, ‘mostly it’s us ourselves. This is why we have influence’ (IO combatant, int. 3 March 2017). We propose in the next section that this rapid cobbling together of heterogeneous elements of armed opposition was possible because of the embedded repertoires of armed struggle shared by people across South Sudan.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND OLD EXPERTISE

The organisers of the central Equatoria IO movement demonstrate the impossibility of defining or distinguishing civilians from rebels in this context; in consequence, the question of whether civilians have any agency in negotiating with rebels becomes essentially irrelevant. These semantic categories of government-rebel/military-civilian are increasingly blurred because of the isolation and neglect brought about by the economic crisis and the civil war. Both the local government and the rebels lack the necessary economic support to wage a war, and insecurity, raising cost of transportation and poor roads increases isolation: in such circumstances, all armed groups, the government included, draw increasingly on locally-based organisers and supporters.

In these circumstances, personal and regional histories of organised violence are vitally important. Local residents and these armed groups today are tied into the genealogies of civil-military administrations of various state and rebel orders, and share a basic local knowledge about civil war survival and management. The central Equatoria IO’s order and legitimacy – the two key terms of ‘rebel governance’ literature – are built on these historical modalities and patterns of practice from the last three generations. It is therefore vital to examine local genealogies of practice, common knowledge, and personal work experience across these various forms of administration; we argue that there is a sustained and embedded logic of governance and organisation in the region that sets out established patterns of how to manage in situations of protracted crisis.

The knowledge and experience of those who are being drawn in to this new armed organisation shapes the nature of the rebellion and is crucial for their efficacy. Personal professional experience is often overlooked in areas which have suffered multiple, inter-generational civil wars. But this experience underpins the deep continuities in forms and ideas of order in these regions. This professional experience is, like these orders, hybrid: many people working within and in support of the IO in central Equatoria are drawing on skills from military service, work in medical and humanitarian NGOs, local government offices (sometimes in both Uganda and South Sudan), as refugee camp representatives in previous wars, and as lay clerics. Some members of Mother’s Unions and women’s
associations working in support of the IO in urban and refugee settlements in Uganda have previous experience as court members and civil-military administrators with the SPLM; several chiefs from the Mundari, Bari and Kakwa sub-groups fighting in the IO have fought in the Anyanya and SPLA; many local teachers have taught or organised schools in the DRC’s Aba refugee camp in the 1960s and 1980s, in Arua in the 1970s and 1990s, and within SPLA-held territories. Their experience spans peace and wartime governance.

IO recruits and organisers cut across normative categories of civilians, military actors, state agents, and refugees. Most ‘traditional authorities’ in the Yei area – chiefs, elders, women leadership, spiritual and clan authorities, and customary land arbitrators – have either relocated to within IO-held territory or to refugee camps along and across the borders (ML, int. 7 March 2017). As mentioned above, by September 2016, many government officials and civil servants, as well as police and soldiers, had defected in small groups or as individuals, or fled from violence in the Yei area. Many of IO organisers in Equatoria are made up of SPLA-era (1983-2013) cadres of experienced organisers. Ex-combatants and former civil-military administrators from the previous two civil wars, both men and women, are now involved in organising the transport of people and supplies to and from rebel held areas, managing refugee community collective mobilisation and funding, and organising local administration and justice systems both within displaced camps and refugee sites and within the occupied territories. This includes elite anti-government ex-commanders. One example is Abraham Wani who in the late 1980s was the first SPLA civil-military administrator for the Yei area, and later became the Deputy Governor of Yei River State until his flight into exile in 2016. Another is a chairman of a section of Rhino Camp who was until recently a SPLA soldier in the signal corps in Juba (IO spokesperson, int. 4 March 2017). A younger generation of administrators and coordinators of the IO in Central Equatoria defected from the SPLM Youth League in Yei and Kajo Keji, including both chairmen in each town; they are joined by many ex-government officials under the age of 35, who complain variously of their failures to combat land grabbing, corruption, bribery and illicit tendering while in local government. ‘No laws we made ever worked; … I evaluate my performance, and it is equivalent to zero’ (ex-SPLM official, int. 25 February 2017).

In the refugee camps, particularly in the hugely expanded Rhino and Bidi Bidi camp complexes, often-elderly IO recruiters work via the block leaders and camp chairmen, who gather people to talk under their own auspices. Recruitment drives work primarily through small meetings and discussions; many young men in the camps will openly declare themselves to be IO, and ‘just waiting for guns.’ Some of these pro-IO individuals work as go-betweens, to ferry medicines and injured or ill fighters between camps, towns, and ‘the bush’ (refugee politician, int. 7 March 2017). This is in part organised by the IO’s senior officers, including a military intelligence officer from the Fajulu ethnic group who used to work in South Sudan’s National Security services. Some ex-government officials are organising transit for new recruits via Koboko (refugee priest, int. 6 March 2017). Local IO detachments in border areas apparently have good working relationships with DRC and Ugandan officials, partly because so many IO officers previously worked in local government themselves and have established connections and expertise. These agents are crucial to local recruitment – and to the movement’s legitimacy – both within central Equatoria and in the refugee camps and urban communities in northern Uganda.

To understand the dynamics of this local leadership, it is vital for civil war scholars to look towards recent anthropological and historical studies which pull apart conceptualisations of ‘state versus rebel’, or ‘customary versus state’. This renewed field of literature demonstrates
the complexity of authority in South Sudan. Powerful but localised ideas of ‘stateness’ are not necessarily embodied or institutionalised in any one personage, office or structure, but work as hybridised forms of order, heavily structured by sediments of historical power dynamics and political ideas (Twijnstra and Titeca 2016, p. 284; see also Pendle 2015, Leonardi 2013, Justin and van Leeuwen 2016). As Twijnstra et al. (2014, pp. 393-4) note, this literature demonstrates that SPLM/A networks – and now IO networks too – are based ‘much more on associative and historic ties that generate political capital rather than ethnic or communal ties.’ We would add that these historical networks also generate extensive expertise in negotiating and organising various administrations.

This expertise stretches back beyond the SPLM/A occupation of the central Equatoria region (c. 1987 onwards): the civil-military administrations, justice and education systems of the late 1980s and 1990s SPLA occupation were grounded in knowledge and practice of earlier rebel movements and self-defence organisation in the region since the 1960s. Central Equatoria and the Uganda-Congo borderlands are a historical theatre of war, particularly during the Simba rebellion, the Anya-Nya civil war, and the downfall of Idi Amin over the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these organisers and mobilisers have been involved in civil-military orders since the 1960s, as part of both rebel and state administrations (see Duyvestyn et al. 2016, p. 34).

The IO’s local organisation is therefore built not only on these recently defected men and women who have been educated and trained under the SPLM/A, but on the long-term experience of civil war mobilisation and organisation of elders, chiefs and other customary authorities now in their 60s and 70s. During our research, we met many elderly men and women leaders mobilising people, resources and civil-military order in the refugee camps, borders and IO-held territories. Many of these elders have fought in both the SPLA and the Anyanya, in the 1960s and 1970s; some individuals have worked as mobilisers in three successive wars and for various local militias and self-defence groups (refugee priest, int. 28 February 2017). The IO here includes both old and young (often well-armed) members of the anti-SPLA ‘protection militias’ such as the Mundari militias organised by former Central Equatoria State Governor Clement Wani Konga, and funded by the Sudan government, which operated around Juba in the second civil wars. One of these elderly men recounted a conversation he had with Thomas Cirilo by telephone from Kampala (IO elder and recruiter, int. 7 March 2017). ‘Thomas said: “the elephant is not tired of carrying its tusks. Are you tired of your own tusks?” I said, I am still active, as long as I am alive I am still in this thing.’

This is visible not least in the patterns of conflict and survival at play today. The current conflict has settled into well-established patterns of guerrilla warfare in South Sudan since the 1960s, with rebel units carrying out sporadic ambushes and attacks on passing forces and vehicles, and – in retaliation – government troops attacking, burning and looting ‘rebel’ villages. Both sides attempt to control population movements. Many of the region’s residents, including those who are now refugees in Uganda, have long experience of these sustained patterns of warfare and rebel organisation, as well as of flight and exile. Younger residents also have extensive experience of working across various ‘rebel movements’ inside government and out, including in the SPLM/A civil administrations running in the Yei area since 1997. The wartime ideologies of the SPLM/A and John Garang, its leader up to 2005, as well as the 1960s legacies of local Anyanya guerrilla intellectuals, including Aggrey Jaden, Eliaba Surur, and Elia Lupe, were a crucial element. These were not only elite

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soliloquising or extraverted strategies for gaining international support for nominally ‘democratic’ or ‘socialist’ movements, but had (and continue to have) substantial intellectual content and purchase locally. Their personal positions, speeches and ideas around federalism and devolved, ruralised social services and governance are in popular circulation, and part of the mobilisation and training of the IO itself (IO combatant, int. 3 March 2017; refugee politician, int. 6 March 2017).

The central Equatoria IO’s forces have been (and continue to be) mobilised primarily by this local leadership. The growing manpower of the various armed groups in Equatoria is primarily volunteers. Recruitment peaked around December 2016, with some rebel administrators working within IO bases reporting over 100 people being registered a day. This includes a small number of young women, who reportedly work primarily as first aiders – ‘but we have some stubborn ones [women] who go to the front’ (IO combatant, int. 3 March 2017). The social buy-in that these older experienced workers (and their younger ex-SPLM counterparts) are able to mobilise within local communities is key to on-going Central Equatoria IO finance.

There is a clear lack of funds for the movement. Rebel organisers report that they are reliant on individual donations and collections, particularly from businessmen, to buy food, arms, and ammunition (IO humanitarian representative, int. 22 February 2017); some of this money comes from the diaspora (IO recruiter, int. 7 March 2017), but ‘the movement is a South Sudanese movement’ (IO spokesperson, int. 6 March 2017). This includes individual donations in dollars from abroad, up to (we were told) around $1000. They also gather food from the extremely limited rations provided to residents. ‘We are trying to do it so the Office of the Prime Minister [of Uganda] and the UNHCR don’t know’ (IO recruiter, int. 7 March 2017). An orphanage relocated from outside Yei town provides up to two sacks of grain per month from its quota via its church staff and volunteers. The IO’s ‘Chamber of Commerce’ is also seeking ‘investors’ in the occupied territories – to support IO income from taxation on the cross-border trade in teak, honey and gold (IO spokesperson, int. 22 February 2017). These funds are used to purchase arms in the Congo in small quantities, which are then carried back to bases via the IO-controlled Aba road (refugee priest, int. 6 March 2017). Within South Sudan, many rebel groups are dependent on the agreed use of pro-IO residents' farms and fishponds (IO spokesperson, int. 25 February 2017). Rebel groups are also reported to be using homemade guns and grenades (IO spokesperson, int. 4 March 2017).

There are reasonable opportunities for young men in the rebellion, too. As one man said (int. 28 February 2017), ‘why should I waste my time in the camp’ if someone in the bush can be promoted to the rank of a brigadier? ‘Any group of youth with guns can promote you to a rank.’ This includes youth who are technically Ugandan or who hold Ugandan citizenship; a long-standing feature of the Uganda-South Sudanese conflicts, these recruits ‘sometimes [just] want to identify with us; they want to do something with their lives; and there’s a possibility of getting some [money]’ (IO spokesperson, 13 March 2017).

These are repertoires of explanation and logics of entrenched crisis founded on decades of wartime and post-war experience in the Yei area, and on generations of residents who know the (limited) options within war, refugee camps, and insurrections. These explanations draw on local historical narratives of resistance, pre-colonial and colonial-era defence. Like Zande communities make reference to bazangi post-colonial chiefs’ guards in organising anti-LRA defence groups (Titeca 2017, p. 4), Kakwa fighters and mobilisers are drawing on a common story of a clash between Kakwa and Dinka Anyanya fighters at Balago Bindi in the mid-1960s as a political echo of current events: the story goes that Dinka forces from Rumbek
were sent to intimidate a local Anyanya commander, Michael Lorwe, into giving up some armaments; Lorwe was killed, and in response to this internal treachery, the Equatorian forces killed the Dinka forces: (‘and the skulls, with scarification marks, are there up to now at Balago Bindi’ (IO combatant, int. 7 March 2017). These stories tie Salva Kiir in, with many accounts noting that Kiir’s father was killed during this incident (refugee priest, int. 7 March 2017; WG, int. 13 March 2017). So ‘this Balago Bindi incident is very fresh in the minds of the Dinkas’ too (IO spokesperson, int. 13 March 2017). This type of continuing history is also psychologically useful to a worryingly under-supplied movement in uncertain and fearful circumstances (Titeca 2017, p. 6).

CONCLUSION

This is a snapshot study of an emergent local civil war, and as such is a partial and occluded picture. But it evidences two key points. In contexts of chronic crises of governance and repeated civil war, the distinction between state and rebel actor, and between state and rebel government, is essentially false. As such, these various forms of government are part of a historically-embedded logic and practice in these contexts; local orders are rooted within a genealogy of common knowledge, personal work experience, and the normal range of actions available to people with long experience of living and organising themselves in long-running wars and fragile, often-violence peace.

This study thus seeks to emphasise that rebel governance studies’ renewed focus on institutionalisation must also be reflected in an exploration of the genealogies and expertise of ‘rebel’ organisers themselves. Their personal histories and actions are ordered and delimited not only by the terminologies and structures embedded within local systems (Titeca 2017, p. 14), but also by generations of knowledge and experience of what can be made, managed and achieved during periods of deteriorating stability and growing violence. As Debos (2016) has observed in Chad, people in these situations of endemic conflict are rooted in systems of governance that span ‘peace’ or ‘war’. We cannot divorce studies of a rebel group’s attempts to impose order, or discussions of rebel ‘legitimacy’, from specific historical and social histories. On the central Equatoria borderlands, there are roles to fulfil and choices to be made that have been taken in previous wars by current rebels, their parents and grandparents. Whether certain modalities are put in motion is still, at this level, governed much more by these established patterns than by whatever is determined in South Africa, Addis Ababa, or Juba, and governed by a broad knowledge of how these periods might play out.
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