

SITUATION UPDATE

November 2024



Living with Lobong: Power, Gold, and the UPDF in Eastern Equatoria

KEY FINDINGS

- Louis Lobong Lojore, the governor of Eastern Equatoria, has entrenched his control of the state by building an elite coalition across ethnic lines and disbursing revenues related to the state's gold-mining sector. Among the communities of Eastern Equatoria, however, Lobong's popularity is limited, even among his own ethnic group, the Toposa.
- In 2024, Lobong recruited 1,400 police officers in violation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS).
- Discontent with Lobong is so deeply rooted that in April 2024, the Toposa facilitated a Murle raid on Lobong's herds that took 16,000–24,000 head of cattle.
- Recent Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF) encroachments into Eastern Equatoria are designed to displace South Sudanese civilians and gain control of agricultural land. While these advances have caused local unrest, Salva Kiir, the South Sudanese president, has been silent on the matter, and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) has backed Ugandan incursions elsewhere in the country.

Context

It was in Torit, now the capital of Eastern Equatoria state, that the first Sudanese civil war (1955–72) began. Shortly before Sudan became independent in 1956, Equatorian soldiers rose up in protest against a government that had not yet taken office. The end of the ensuing war failed to assuage Equatorian discontent. The peoples of the Equatorias suspected that the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement would enable the Dinka—southern Sudan’s largest minority—to marginalize them politically. These fears intensified during the second civil war (1983–2005). While the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) under John Garang claimed to be fighting for a ‘New Sudan’, Equatorians suspected that the rebel movement would attempt to control their region.

The beginning of Sudan’s second civil war saw Louis Lobong Lojore in charge of a militia force in Kapoeta allied to the government in Khartoum. After the SPLA first took the town in 1988, Garang pressured Lobong to join the rebel movement.¹ Lobong agreed and soon became the coordinator of SPLM/A humanitarian operations in the area. Many Equatorians remained suspicious of the SPLA, which they perceived as an occupying army.

After 2005 and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), Eastern Equatoria was one of three states carved out of the Equatoria region. The CPA period (2005–11) saw a gradually worsening relationship between the SPLA and the Equatorian peoples, who complained of harassment and land grabbing by Dinka troops. Lobong flourished during this period. First appointed the head of intelligence operations in the Equatorias, in 2010 he became the governor of Eastern Equatoria, a position he has retained ever since, making him the longest-serving governor in South Sudan.²

For the first two years of South Sudan’s civil war (2013–18), Eastern Equatoria remained relatively peaceful. The state’s elite struggled to position itself

in relation to the two principal belligerent parties, the SPLA and Sudan People’s Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO). In 2014, during the first stages of peace talks, the South Sudanese government objected to the participation of an Equatorian delegation (Boswell, 2021). The lesson for the Equatorias was clear: only military force would guarantee the region a seat at the negotiating table.

The civil war widened to include the Equatorias after the collapse of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) in 2016. As Riek Machar, the leader of the SPLM/A-IO, fled south from Juba, he attempted to organize the opposition in Equatoria (Boswell, 2017). Machar did not give the Equatorian SPLA-IO sufficient military resources to defend its territory, however, and by the end of 2017, the opposition was in disarray and the region devastated. Thomas Cirillo, formerly a high-ranking SPLA officer, formed another opposition group, the National Salvation Front (NAS). By the beginning of 2018, the Equatorian opposition was split between the two groups.

Since the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, both the NAS and the SPLM/A-IO have suffered military defections to Kiir’s regime. Despite such opposition weakness, Lobong’s reign in Eastern Equatoria is built on shaky foundations. His support base in the state is largely constituted by elites who have profited from his time in office, while the people of Eastern Equatoria have experienced incursions from both the UPDF and Dinka cattle guards from Jonglei.

Lobong’s lessons

Lobong uses a variety of strategies to maintain his rule. He has spread his political coalition across the putative divisions of South Sudan’s political parties, allowing him to maximize the positions he can control under the terms of the R-ARCSS (Craze and Markó, 2022). For instance, in Kapoeta South county, the commissioner, Paul Lokale, is a close associate of

1 The SPLA ceded control of Kapoeta in 1991, before recapturing it in 2003.

2 During the period in which South Sudan was composed of 28—and then 32—states, Lobong retained the governorship of Kapoeta state (2015–20), only to reclaim the governorship of Eastern Equatoria when South Sudan returned to a 10-state administrative system in 2020.

Lobong, despite being from the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), putatively an opposition group. The previous commissioner, Angelo Lominate, also from the SSOA, was dismissed in March 2024, due to his disputes with Lobong over revenue collection in Kapoeta town. Rather than build itself up as an independent political movement, the SSOA functions as an arm of the SPLM.

Since 2018, Lobong has deepened his economic control of the state and isolated SPLM-IO politicians. The commissionership of Kapoeta East, Lobong's home county, was given to the SPLM-IO, but commissioner Angelo Abdalla has remained relatively powerless, given Lobong's dominance. Lobong has also appointed mayors and executive directors to undercut SPLM-IO appointments, effectively creating rival administrations across the state. The situation is most marked in Torit, where the SPLM-IO controls one half of the town and the mayor, Mustafa Albino, a Lobong loyalist, controls the other half. Elsewhere, Lobong's loyalists have secured control of the border crossings at Nimule and Nadapal. Some fees paid at these border crossings—which, aside from oil, likely constitute the most lucrative source of revenue in South Sudan—go to the National Revenue Authority, but much of the income from these fees is paid to local and state officials, both formally and informally, and much does not enter the state's official accounts, and instead goes directly into the pockets of the elite around Lobong.³

The formal process of county creation in Eastern Equatoria has allowed Lobong to fragment the opposition by intensifying ethnic divisions. Until the signing of the CPA, Eastern Equatoria comprised two districts: Torit and Kapoeta. The latter was then divided into two (Kapoeta and Budi), before Kapoeta became three separate counties.⁴ At each stage of this process administrative boundaries were made a function of ethnic identity, with political positions and the location of county capitals seen as a question of ethnic 'possession'. Lobong used this process to appoint loyalists and set his opponents

against one another. As politics became ethnic, ethnicity itself became political (Craze, 2013).

In July 2023, Lobong created the Imehejek Administrative Area, in violation of the terms of the R-ARCSS. The area's creation was designed to solve long-standing contentions between the Lopit and Pari over the name of Lafon/Lopa county, from which the administrative area was carved out. Underneath contentions over nomenclature lay political concerns: the name of the county was held to indicate the county headquarters, and thus the locus for money that should have come from state coffers. The name of Lafon/Lopa became a zero-sum competition: if the county had been called Lafon, then the administrative centre should have been in Lafon, dominated by the Pari, whereas if it had been called Lopa, it should have been in Imehejek, a Lopit area. With the creation of the administrative area, Lobong has carved out two mono-ethnic areas, each directly answerable to him. The creation of the administrative area has essentialized ethnic difference to the detriment of the Pari and Lopit peoples, who have many cross-cutting ties, but to the benefit of Lobong, who can more easily control communities directly answerable to him for funds and positions.

Along with his exploitation of the formal architecture of the state, Lobong has enhanced his control of Eastern Equatoria by using kinship ties to build up strategic alliances. He has strengthened his relationship to Bor Dinka communities through his first wife, Semira Ayen Althaeb, while he has reinforced his links to the Lotuko elite through his marriage to Josephine Ifita, the chairperson of the State Revenue Authority. A third marriage, to Natalina Lucy, consolidated ties to the Madi, a group otherwise relatively hostile to the SPLM.

The support built from such strategic kinship ties is supplemented by payouts to customary authorities. For instance, the acquiescence of Didinga traditional authorities to Lobong's reign is purchased with revenue from gold mining in Ngauro, which erodes the constituency of the SPLM-IO deputy governor,

³ Author telephone interviews with state political personnel, names withheld, August–September 2024. For details of gold smuggling across the border, see Enough Project (2020); Hunter et. al (2021); Hunter and Opala (2023); and The Sentry (2020).

⁴ Budi is populated by two ethnic groups: the Buya and Didinga.

Mary Alphonse Lodira. Potential rivals are also appeased with positions. In March 2024, at Lobong's behest, Kiir removed Sarafino Maira Jamus, the speaker of the state parliament, and replaced him with the popular politician Charles Odwar Okech, who had been rumoured to be mulling a run against Lobong in the now-delayed December 2024 elections. Those who cannot be bought are replaced. In March 2024, Kiir fired Emmanuel Lolimo, the Kapoeta North county commissioner, because he had drawn too close to one of Lobong's principal Toposa political rivals—and sometimes ally—Josephine Napon, the national minister of environment and forestry.

Areas of the state that Lobong cannot control are deliberately marginalized or destabilized. Ikotos county was given an SPLM-IO commissioner, and since this decision, Lobong has undermined the opposition's capacity to govern the mountainous county by starving it of funds. Lobong and Peter Lokeng Lotone, the state minister of local government and law enforcement, who is a Logir from Ikotos, have also stirred up intercommunal fighting between Lango clans in Ikotos. The Logir have recently carried out raids—including in September 2024—in both Ikotos and Budi counties, and have allegedly received state support to do so. These raids have created a zone of chaos and instability that is not the opposite of governance, but the very means by which the state has rendered such SPLM-IO areas ungovernable: creating disorder is the form governance takes.

Lobong's rule is guaranteed by his support from the political elite in Juba. Such connections are finessed by shared interests in Eastern Equatoria's gold-mining sector. Kapoeta—which includes Lobong's home village of Namurunyang—contains the largest gold deposits in South Sudan and employs between 10,000 and 60,000 people as artisanal miners. Gold buyers—often Somali, Kenyan, or Ugandan—report having to pay up to 50 per cent of their income to politicians in the Kapoeta area (Hunter and Opala, 2023) in return for protection in what is essentially an unregulated market. Many of the companies registered to mine gold are linked to Juba's elite,

including to the second vice-president, James Wani Igga, and members of Salva Kiir's family (The Sentry, 2020). Those involved in reaping the benefits of the gold trade encompass Obuto Mamur Mete, the long-serving Lotuko minister of national security. After Mamur visited Kapoeta at the end of 2023 with a heavily armed escort, however, the relationship between Mamur and Lobong reportedly became strained due to disagreements over payouts from the gold sector.⁵

Lobong maintains generally cordial relations with the SSPDF in the state, and with the National Security Service (NSS), which has been tasked with guarding key gold-mining sites. Some SSPDF commanders, including the 2nd Brigade commander, Kulang Tarif Chuol, are involved in teak logging, with the connivance of the governor; others are involved in gold mining.⁶ Lobong supplemented these forces by recruiting 1,400 police officers, who graduated in June 2024. This force will be deployed to control crucial border areas, and is loyal to Lobong.⁷ It has been formed in violation of the terms of the R-ARCSS, which commits the government to refrain from new recruitment. That the police service was chosen as a vehicle for this forced reflects a nation-wide trend for politicians to build up the police service as a counterweight to the NSS (Small Arms Survey, 2024, p. 7).

Lobong has thus created a durable form of rule predicated on creating an elite coalition via marriage ties, the politicization of ethnic differences, and the disbursement of gold revenues. This coalition is backed up by support from Juba. Such a predatory form of rule, however, has not won Lobong much support among the communities of Eastern Equatoria.

Toposa troubles

Such is Lobong's unpopularity among his own Toposa ethnic group that he was unseated as community chairperson in 2020. The community instead chose to back Paul Napon Yonai, a member

5 Author telephone interviews with Eastern Equatorian informants, September 2024.

6 Author telephone interviews with Eastern Equatorian informants, September 2024.

7 Author telephone interviews with security service personnel, Juba and Torit, September 2024.

of the Eastern Equatoria State Legislature well-loved by Toposa cattle guards. Napon was backed by Losike Lokorai, a popular Toposa politician and a member of the national Council of States.

For Lobong, loyalty to Juba has come at a price. Serving the interests of elites in Juba has frequently meant acting against the interests of his own community, which has reacted accordingly. In 2022, Bor Dinka cattle herders entered Eastern Equatoria, displaced an estimated 14,000 Equatorians, and allowed their grazing animals to destroy crops, resulting in clashes breaking out between the Dinka cattle herders and agricultural Equatorian groups. Equatorians alleged that the herds were the property of Dinka elites in Juba and that their guards received small arms from the South Sudanese security services, at the behest of elite Bor Dinka politicians. The state government did not intervene to resolve the situation. Instead, Acholi and Lotoko youth facilitated a Murle raid on Dinka cattle camps. The Murle raiders then sheltered in Torit and the Imehejek Administrative Area, before returning to the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA).⁸

In 2024, there was an even more daring raid. An altercation had occurred in Kapoeta East in 2023, which led to a Dinka police officer shooting a Toposa man. Lobong sheltered the police officer, who was moved for his own protection to Kapoeta South, where he shot two Toposa men in another quarrel. The Toposa responded by surrounding the barracks where the man had been placed in protective custody. Lobong directed his security forces to extract the officer and take him to Juba, via Torit. Many Toposa interpreted this as a slight to the community, which looked for an opportunity to retaliate. In 2024, one of Lobong's daughters was married, following an extremely high bridewealth payment. Because customary rules prevented the Toposa from raiding Lobong's herd themselves,

they instead facilitated a Murle raid in April 2024, which took approximately 16,000–24,000 head of cattle from one of Lobong's cattle camps, including the cattle paid in bridewealth for his daughter.⁹ When asked to pursue the raiders, the Toposa demurred; the raiders' return to the GPAA was facilitated by a multitude of different ethnic groups in Eastern Equatoria.

Ugandan encroachment

Eastern Equatoria borders Kenya and Uganda, and both countries claim territories in South Sudan. In 2015, UPDF forces entered South Sudan in the area of Pogee, Magwi county, attacking villages and displacing civilians. Further UPDF incursions occurred in Ikotos county in 2022.¹⁰ Recent UPDF movements into Pogee began in June 2024 following cattle raids into Uganda carried out by South Sudanese youth. By August 2024, the UPDF had established military outposts in Pogee, while also entering a series of South Sudanese villages, where Ugandan soldiers razed properties and killed civilians.¹¹

The UPDF has dug boreholes and reportedly encouraged Ugandan civilians to settle in the occupied areas. Its move into Magwi is likely motivated by economic interests—the area contains valuable gold reserves and rich agricultural land. Pole Pole Benjamin Olum, the commissioner of Magwi county, stated that Ugandan encroachment has created fear among local Acholi communities and led to widespread displacement.¹² Members of South Sudan's Transitional National Legislative Assembly have also raised concerns about UPDF encroachment both in Eastern Equatoria and—since August 2024—in the area of Kajo Keiji, Central Equatoria, where members of South Sudan's government have accused the UPDF of killing 17 civilians.¹³

8 Author telephone interviews with sources in Torit and Bor, September 2024.

9 Author telephone interviews with multiple sources in Eastern Equatoria, August–October 2024.

10 See Radio Tamazuj (2022).

11 Author interviews with Magwi county elders, August–September 2024; Sebit (2024); Radio Tamazuj (2024c; 2024d).

12 Author telephone interviews with Magwi county elders, August–September 2024; Radio Tamazuj (2024a).

13 Author telephone interviews with politicians from Central Equatoria, August–September 2024. See also Radio Tamazuj (2024b).

During this crisis, politicians at state and national levels in South Sudan have been notable by their absence. Lobong has claimed that international borders are the responsibility of the national government, deflecting responsibility onto Kiir's regime, which has not made a statement on the matter. The regime is beholden to Kampala: the UPDF supported it during the South Sudanese civil war (2013–18) and protected Juba from the SPLA-IO at the onset of the conflict. Uganda and Sudan then backed the R-ARCSS. The two governments are the guarantors of Kiir's regime. The SSPDF and UPDF worked together as recently as August, when a joint force that also included Central African Republic (CAR) troops attacked three camps belonging to the Lord's Resistance Army (Radio Tamazuj, 2024c). The UPDF has also reportedly recently deployed troops in Juba when Kiir has gone on trips abroad, to protect the regime against a possible coup. Given his regime's dependence on Uganda, it would not be easy for Kiir to speak out against the UPDF incursions, even if he were minded to do so.

It is tempting to see the Ugandan incursions as indications of a weak South Sudanese state, brought low by the country's recent economic collapse. The situation in Western Bahr el Ghazal state, however, suggests another possibility. In August the UPDF moved with SSPDF and NSS escorts into Wau, the state capital, and then moved to Boro Medina, a small town with rich gold deposits close to the CAR border. These movements indicate that rather than a weak state oppressed by its neighbours, South Sudan is run by an elite in Juba with little popular legitimacy that is collaborating with the UPDF for mutual gain. Rather than the UPDF incursions being a move against the national government in Juba, they are more likely to be in its interest.

The state of the opposition

Since the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, the government has systematically tried to weaken the SPLM/A-IO in Greater Equatoria. Major commanders—such as Moses Lokujo and James Nando—have

defected and then been deployed against opposition forces.¹⁴ The stalled security sector reform process required by the R-ARCSS has also taken its toll on what was once the most organized SPLA-IO force in the Equatorias, with soldiers abandoning cantonment sites and returning to farming, exasperated by the unfulfilled promises of the agreement.

Nevertheless, the SPLA-IO maintains some military strength in Eastern Equatoria. Of the three divisions that Justin Akado created following the collapse of the ARCSS in 2016, the Tafeng Division, created for the central counties of the state, and largely for Lotuko and Lango people, remains a powerful force, and is based in Torit county under the command of Patrick Ohiti Oswald, a Lotuko from Ifwotu payam.

The SPLM-IO also has strong political support in Eastern Equatoria. Nathaniel Oyet, the deputy speaker of the National Legislative Assembly, is esteemed by his Acholi community, whose chairperson, Otim David, was also a long-standing member of the SPLM-IO. Martin Abucha, the SPLM-IO national minister of mining, is a Madi from Magwi. The SPLM-IO has strong support in both communities, despite Madi backing for the community's elite, which has largely supported Lobong. The Lotuko are also opposed to Lobong. The SPLM-IO, however, has struggled to turn this support into political power. Lobong has successfully prevented the opposition from building up a sustainable revenue base in the state. The SPLM-IO deputy governor, Mary Alphonse Lodira, while popular in her home county of Budi, spent much of her life in the diaspora, and lacks the local political capital necessary to constitute a real opposition to Lobong. With elections delayed for at least another two years, the SPLM/A-IO faces the prospect of further defections as Lobong slowly strengthens his grip over the elite and the economy of Eastern Equatoria.

Just as for the SPLM/A-IO, the period since 2018 has seen the NAS steadily weakened in Eastern Equatoria. Its forces now have little presence in the state outside of the Ikotos mountain of Imotong, although some forces are still in Chukudum, near Lotukei, and at Ayii Kit along the Juba–Nimule road. In a bid

¹⁴ In Eastern Equatoria, Okot David Awai, the commander of the SPLA-IO 9th Brigade in Magwi county, defected in 2017, first to Taban Deng Gai's faction and then to the SSPDF.

for relevance, in March 2024, Cirillo appointed Kamilo Otwari, a Lotuko from Eastern Equatoria, as his chief of staff. Subsequent efforts at recruitment in the state have only been minimally successful, and the recruits have all crossed into the remaining NAS heartlands in Central Equatoria. The SSPDF has intermittently moved against the NAS in Eastern Equatoria, disrupting a mobilization in May 2024 in Obbo payam, Magwi county. It has also continued to harass populations putatively loyal to the NAS: in August 2024, the SSPDF moved into Ikotos county and rounded up young men, until the community mobilized and pushed out the government forces.

Conclusion

Although defections and political isolation have weakened both the SPLM/A-IO and NAS, dissent against Lobong's regime continues. Following the further extension of already delayed elections to 2026, the political structure created by the R-ARCSS has fallen into almost complete illegitimacy. In the absence of a meaningful formal political opposition to Lobong's and Kiir's regimes, communities themselves are acting to resist the predatory encroachments of the centralized state. In Magwi county local youth are organizing against the UPDF, while Lobong's own Toposa community has facilitated Murle raids on the governor's herds. In a context in which politics is increasingly ethnicized, this process of resistance is likely to be chaotic, but in Eastern Equatoria today it represents the sole means of protest against Lobong's almost complete domination of the state. ●

Abbreviations and acronyms

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
CAR	Central African Republic
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
GPAA	Greater Pibor Administrative Area
NAS	National Salvation Front
NSS	National Security Service
R-ARCSS	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in-Opposition
SSOA	South Sudan Opposition Alliance
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
UPDF	Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces

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