



# Understanding Hussein Abdel Bagi

*South Sudan's vice-president from the borderlands*

RVI FIELD UPDATE 3

## Key points

- Hussein Abdel Bagi's appointment as the third Vice-President of South Sudan is an important building block for the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU), particularly its relations with Khartoum. Hussein's long experience of Sudanese politics, and friendships with members of the Sudan Military Council, will likely be very useful to President Kiir.
- Abdel Bagi's family has held economic and political power on the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, southern Darfur, and southern Kordofan borderlands for many years. The family's control over cross-border routes between Aweil, Darfur and Kordofan should bring local security and economic benefits to President Kiir, who is keen to reanimate cross-border trade and security cooperation.
- The appointment also acts as a counterweight to Hussein's Northern Bahr el-Ghazal rival, former Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) Chief of Staff, Paul Malong, who remains outside of the formal peace process, but retains ambitions for the presidency. While Kiir's government has already tackled Malong's financial power across the border,<sup>1</sup> Hussein's elevation will allow him to consolidate military control and undercut Malong's ability to recruit for his own militias.
- The Abdel Bagi family's proven capacity to recruit young men from the borderlands into militias may also be useful to President Kiir as he seeks to maintain control in the area. This is particularly evident as the current economic crisis pushes desperate teenagers and young men north into Darfur looking for work, who are also easily recruited or coerced into armed work.
- The appointment will also help to build bridges across Bahr el-Ghazal's militia landscape. Hussein's brother, Agany Abdel Bagi (a former SPLA General), is understood to be close to Santino Deng Wol—Ground Force Commander of the South Sudan Peoples Defence Forces (SSPDF)—who holds considerable power and farmlands in the area.

## The Peace Agreement

In mid-February, diplomatic deadlock over the South Sudan peace agreement was finally broken by President Salva Kiir when he conceded on the issue of state boundaries, reducing them from 32 back to 10 (the number which preceded the civil war). This enabled the declaration of the Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU) on 22 February, pending the appointment of vice-presidents and ministers.

Four of the five vice-presidential positions created under the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) were easily agreed. However, South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA)—a group of nine militias and opposition parties—could not settle on their candidate. Eventually, it fell to President Kiir and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan—the chair of Sudan's Sovereign Council and a key broker in the negotiation of R-ARCSS—to propose a candidate.

Kiir and Burhan decided on General Hussein Abdel Bagi Ayii Akol, who comes from a well-established family of political-military entrepreneurs and gatekeepers active in the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands. The

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choice reflects the significant interest Khartoum retains in South Sudan’s peace process and the transitional government.

## The Abdel Bagi Family

The Abdel Bagi family built their power in their home area of Madhol on the border between what is now South Sudan and southern Darfur and Kordofan. During the 1950s and 1960s, General Hussein’s father, Abdel Bagi Ayii Akol, worked as a court clerk for Deng Majok, the powerful paramount chief of Abyei (part of the structures of indirect rule inherited by the Khartoum government at independence). Through this work, Abdel Bagi learned Arabic and converted to Islam, which made him well placed to act as a local power broker for the then Sudan Government in his home district of Aweil in Bahr el-Ghazal.

Abdel Bagi’s military power grew when the first southern rebels, the Anya-Nya, assassinated his elder brother in 1963, in retaliation for their collecting taxes for the Sudan Government (the same incident in which Awan Nei, the father of Paul Malong, was also killed). As a result, Abdel Bagi moved to South Darfur and positioned himself as a counterinsurgent for the Khartoum government, recruiting militias from Aweil and training them with the Sudan Armed Forces in El-Obeid. With this growing local political and economic power, Abdel Bagi accumulated farms and property in Meriam in South Darfur, building influence with the Arab Misseriya tribes in South Kordofan and business elites in Khartoum.<sup>2</sup>

Under the 1972 Addis Ababa peace agreement between Khartoum and the Anya-Nya, Abdel Bagi served as Madhol court president in Aweil. When the newly founded SPLA rebelled against Khartoum in 1983, Abdel Bagi returned to South Darfur and began to recruit young men fleeing Aweil into a counterinsurgency militia force.

Abdel Bagi’s militia was called the Southern Sudan Peace Forces, becoming part of the Sudan-proxy umbrella South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF), and locally colloquially called *ee lac ku beric* (‘piss and go’)—a graphic description of their raiding methods. Abdel Bagi later took advantage of the international humanitarian relief effort during the 1987–88 Bahr el-Ghazal famine, which was routed through Meiram, to further entrench his power and influence over dependent populations and refugees.<sup>3</sup>

## Hussein and his Brothers

In 2006, the Abdel Bagi family militia was integrated into the Sudan People’s Liberation Army as part of Paulino Matip’s SSDF. This happened under the terms of the 2006 Juba Agreement, which came after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended the war. Many of Abdel Bagi’s sons—including Hussein and Agany—joined the SPLA in this process, which brought the family under the power of their long-term rival for borderland power, Paul Malong (then governor of the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state).

Agany, Hussein and Nurudin (who works primarily in Khartoum) Abdel Bagi have found new opportunities in South Sudan’s recent civil wars. In 2013–14, Agany—a general in the SPLA—commanded government units fighting Riek Machar’s SPLA-IO in Bor and Upper Nile. However, in mid-2015, Agany defected to the SPLA-IO, before re-defecting to the late Peter Gatdet’s—another long-term Khartoum-backed counterinsurgent—South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA).

Finally, the family formed their own militia—the South Sudan Patriotic Movement/Army (SSPM/A)—back in their home borderland, and rejected the original 2015 ARCSS peace agreement. By then, the elderly Abdel Bagi was based in the safety of Khartoum and his sons, particularly Hussein and Agany, became most evident in the family’s political maneuverings in Khartoum, Juba and their borderland home areas. As in the past, they recruited from young men fleeing Aweil and attacked the SPLA from their stronghold in Meiram across the Sudan border.<sup>4</sup>

The SSPM/A is built upon long-standing chiefly families from the borderland. In 2018, the family forged a financial and political alliance with Dr Costello Garang Ring, a highly educated businessman based in Germany whose father, Chief Riiny Lual, worked with Abdel Bagi senior in Khartoum during the Second

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Civil War, and fought with him against the Anya-Nya in the 1960s. Costello Garang was appointed the chair of the SSPM, while Agany became commander in chief and chief of staff, with Hussein, who is better educated and has more experience in political bargaining than Agany, taking on the role of secretary general.

Costello's step-brother, Mabior Riiny Lual (now the secretary general of SSOA), joined the movement as a partnership between the chiefly families. When Khartoum brokered the agreement in July–August 2018 that led to R-ARCSS, the SSPM/A joined the peace process as part of SSOA.<sup>5</sup> Costello delegated Hussein to head the movement's political wing in Juba.

## Conclusion

Hussein's appointment to the vice-presidency typifies the complicated balance of South Sudanese and regional power interests that underpin R-ARCSS and the agreement to establish the TGoNU. His nomination brings greater Bahr el-Ghazal representation to the vice presidencies, and strengthens TGoNU's military power in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal through Hussein and Agany's longstanding friendships and connections within the South Sudanese military apparatus. This includes the powerful military commander Santino Deng Wol, another local resident of this borderland and now Ground Force Commander of the SSPDF. Hussein's cross-border political and military influence will further consolidate President Kiir's control over the borderlands with Sudan, particularly as Paul Malong—the Abdel Bagi clan's main local rival—is not yet part of R-ARCSS or TGoNU.

## Notes

- 1 See 'Kiir Consolidates Power through Border Deal with Khartoum', X-Border Field Update #1: South Sudan and Sudan, September 2019. (<http://riftvalley.net/publication/kiir-consolidates-power-through-border-deal-khartoum>).
- 2 See Nicki Kindersley, *Politics, Power and Chiefship in Famine and War: a study of the former Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state, South Sudan*, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2018, 16. (<http://riftvalley.net/publication/politics-power-and-chiefship-famine-and-war>)
- 3 Kindersley, *Politics, Power and Chiefship in Famine and War*, 27-29.
- 4 See Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, *Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands*, London: Rift Valley Institute, June 2019, 41. (<http://riftvalley.net/publication/monetized-livelihoods-and-militarized-labour-south-sudans-borderlands>).
- 5 The SSOA's leadership include Josephine Joseph Lagu, Lam Akol, Bangasi Joseph Bakasoro, Khalid Butrous and Gabriel Changson. The SSOA's groups are the Federal Democratic Party & South Sudan Armed Forces (FDP/SSAF), led by Gabriel Changson Chang; the National Salvation Front (NAS), led by Thomas Cirilo Swaka; the National Democratic Movement (NDM), led by Lam Akol; the People's Democratic Movement (PDM), led by Hakim Dario Moi; and the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A), led by Bapiny Montuil Wegjang; the South Sudan National Movement for Change (SSNMC), led by Bangasi Joseph Bakasoro, former independent Governor of Western Equatoria; the South Sudan Patriotic Movement / Army (SSPM/A), led by Costello Garang Ring, with Hussein Abdel Bagi as military commander; the South Sudan United Movement / Army (SSUM/A), previously led by the late Peter Gadet Yaka; and the United Democratic Republican Alliance (UDRA), led by Gatweth K. Thich.



## Credits

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