



South Sudan: Rebels Seek to Remove President Kiir From Power as Country Marks 10 Years of Self-Rule

By Eliud Kibii



In an interview with this writer in a Nairobi hotel on July 10, former SPLA chief of staff Gen Oyat Deng Ajak declared they are planning to oust President Salva Kiir this year.

Ajak, who is also a former minister of Investment and National Security, accuses President Salva Kiir of tribalism, destroying the ruling party SPLM, the SPLA army, the police and running down the country.

He also says that President Kiir does not want to leave power, and it is not possible for the youngest African country to go to 2023 General Election with him in power. Gen Ajak says he wants to die on the seat.

Ajak is among the 11 political detainees accused of plotting a coup in December 2013 against President Kiir. The others were Deng Alor Kuol, Geir Chuang, Cirino Hiten, Kosti Manibe, John Luk, Gen Madut Biar Yel, Chol Tong Mayay. former SPLM secretary general Pagan Amum Ajak, former Defence minister Majak D'Agoot and former Ambassador to the US Ezekiel Lol Gatkouth.

They were released to Kenya in a deal between President Kiir and Uhuru Kenyatta under the

auspices of Igad.

Only recently, before this interview, did President Kiir tell Citizen TV that he felt let down by Igad and particularly President Kenyatta.

“You know for Kenya, I am not happy because after the coup of 2013, President Uhuru took the lead that he was coming to take the leaders that I had apprehended during the coup. I told him, my brother, I cannot give you these people because they have to answer the charges on the role they played in the coup.”

“But President Uhuru put himself in front of me that he will not allow them to talk a single political sentence, that he would keep them safe in his house until I am convinced that they did not do anything. And so we released them to you [Kenya],” Kiir told Citizen TV in the interview aired on July 7.

The 11 detainees had become a sticking point at peace talks.

In his speech on the 10th Anniversary, Kiir vowed not to allow South Sudan to slide back to war. But he identified the National Salvation Front led by Gen Thomas Cirilo as a group that has refused to be part of the peace process and still contributes to instability in some parts of South Sudan.

General Ajak speaks about what happened in the 2013 alleged coup and the new plans to remove President Salva Kiir from power this year.

Eliud Kibii: *What happened on that night before President Salva Kiir accused you of trying to overthrow the government?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: A week earlier, we had a serious discussion with Salva, me, Taban Deng, who is now a vice president, Paul Malong, now a minister and a former minister of Finance at the palace in J1 about the problems we were facing as a movement and party.

We advised that given the situation, it was better to delay the meeting of the National Liberation Council and meet with Riek Machar - First Vice President - and discuss the internal problems because people were talking about the SPLM convention, which was going to take place in May 2014.

We met with him and told him to talk to Riek, meet with Mama Rebecca [Garang], talk to [SPLM secretary general Amum] Pagan, all these people who want to contest the election next year. And these are your friends, your brothers, your comrades, you have been together - here to discuss with them. And after you meet and discuss with them, you call for a meeting of the Political Bureau, which is the most senior, and the Political Bureau will decide what action to take and how people are going to work and move ahead together.

Salva agreed and we had a good evening, had dinner, drunk and had a good time to relax up to very late hours.

At midnight, we went to our houses confident that Salva would agree to the proposal and would not call the meeting. But two days later, he called the meeting, The National Liberation Council is a big body.

Most of them [members] are very young, thus emotional. Salva raised many issues about people who

want to challenge his position.

Riek said he would not attend another meeting because he was personally attacked in the way some people made their comments. Mama Rebecca also refused to go for another meeting.

Pagan was told not to attend the meeting and instead to stay in his house. Look, he is the Secretary General of the party. There is no meeting of the party without the Secretary General.

I was not a member of the National Liberation Council. I was a member during the struggle but when the army was separated from the party, I was relieved.

Now on the day the shooting took place. I was doing a distance learning programme and there was no WiFi in my house for one week. So, I went to a hotel near the airport.

Two of my colleagues came to my house on that Sunday at around 10:30am and when they could not get me, they called and I told them I'm in the hotel and I will be coming home.

But instead waiting, they came to the hotel.

The message was that lets go meet Salva Kiir. It is Malong who was talking.

"We want you personally to go and sit and discuss with Salva," Malong said.

I refused and said if there is a meeting with Salva, it can't be me alone. It has to be all of us. Malong was very disappointed with me.

We had lunch with them up to 1:32pm and they left.

Then Taban Deng called and asked me where we were having lunch. I told him we had lunch with Cirilo and General Malong, who have since left so let's go home. General Gier also called and we went to the house.

One of the officers from the barracks called Taban and this officer used a local dialect. The officer and Taban are Nuer. The officer told Taban, "These Dinka boys have come to disarm us".

This was the beginning of the problem.

Taban put the phone on speaker and I talked to the officer.

I said, "What is the problem?"

He said they there are Dinka boys who have come to disarm us.

And so, I asked him, how many boys have come?

He said a one company. One company is 120 SPLA officers.

But then the Nuer boys who are at the presidential guard unit are more than 1,000. They are 1,500. They cannot be disarmed by one company. Please don't create problem, I said.

This officer told me big man, the way these people are behaving, we will not accept it. We are going to fight now.

I told them, please don't. Let me call the SPLA headquarters and this problem will be solved.

I tried to call the Chief of General Staff then, he is a Nuer, but he was in Australia, and he was coming back by that evening.

Taban said the way this thing is, it will not reach evening. There will be a serious fight.

So, he said instead of waiting for lunch, let him go and brief Riek Machar about what was happening.

I was left with Gier.

Pagan's sister came from church and passed by the house, Majak was coming from Nairobi, he passed by, Thomas Duoth, who was the Director General of External Security Service also came. I told him thank God you are here; you are the right man to take this message now to the President.

I tried to talk to the Acting Chief of Staff, he was not picking up the phone and I called the then Defence Minister Majak, who was also not picking up

I called the director of military intelligence who was in Uganda, the phone was ringing but nobody was picking up.

I told Luoth there is a problem in the barracks and it is you people who can solve this problem.

Unfortunately, he, with the director of internal security, decided to keep quiet. Nobody went to the president who was closing the meeting I talked about of the National Liberation Council.

Since nobody called me, I thought everything was okay and so I went out for the normal logistics.

The shooting took place at 7:30 at the barracks and Taban called me immediately.

If I take you back to the part where I said the Nuer said the Dinka boys were disarming them, it was not really a disarmament.

The Nuer boys had put their weapons in an armory and the Dinka boys had surrounded it. Not that they were carrying the arms with them.

Up to now, nobody knows who sent these boys.

So, when Riek boys came under intense pressure, he gave the order that they take their arms and to do that, they had to break in the store and that's when the shooting happened around 7:30 in the evening.

I was away at the hotel, Lumulul Logistics, and when coming back at around 9pm I passed by Jimmy's house, the Chief of General Staff and told him there is an ongoing shooting, which is getting very serious. Let's go to the barracks. He said no, there are officers controlling the situation and they're not in dire need. These are the presidential guys fighting themselves. So, you go to your house and relax you just rest, he said.

There was a lot of movement of forces on the road and my house is not very far from that of Salva Kiir.

I told Jimmy, as you see I do not have bodyguards, give me some of your bodyguards for escort to my house. He agreed.

Some of Salva's soldiers asked me why I was still moving at this time when there is a shooting and I

am a General. I told them where I was coming from and that I was going to my house.

When I got to the house, I told the kids to sleep down stairs as there was shooting all over Juba.

I stayed in the sitting room until morning.

Salva's bodyguards were deployed and that's when they came and put me under arrest with the others in the morning.

We really don't know, and this is something that has not been investigated, who gave the order for part of the presidential guard unit, mostly Nuer, for their arms to be taken.

Eliud Kibii: *Why do you think you were fingered as one of the suspects? Could these meetings have been the reason?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: Possibly. Or maybe Salva did not expect me to be part of this Malong group that came to signal me to meet with Salva. But all of us are friends of Salva. When I was relieved from SPLA, most of these soldiers who are mostly were Nuer from Bentiu they were the bodyguards of the former general Paulino Matip, who was a militia commander working with Bashir and we were fighting them. So even one time these same forces, they tried to attack me in my office when I was Chief of General Staff. And my argument was Salva was over this force that there is no way you can have a unit, which is mostly from one particular tribe and staying in one place.

As the Chief of General Staff, I wanted these forces to be disarmed, sent to the unit, and then mixed with the other forces so that they are part of the rest SPLA. It was Salva himself who refused this.

Salva was then thinking that he would use this force from Nuer to intimidate Riek, who is also Nuer, who was also having problems with Paulino Matip, who was also Nuer.

This force was not trained in SPLA, they were former militia and then the Dinka boys, who were also brought to Juba after I was released, were locally recruited and armed from the Office of the President, not through the Minister of Defense, not even the Chief of General Staff knew anything about them.

So, this special force, which was locally recruited and privately armed were brought to Juba by Salva himself.

When we go back to that day of the shooting, it is not SPLA soldiers and officers who fought in Juba. It is this private militia group. The militia of Omar Bashir, mostly Nuer from Bentiu, and the privately recruited militia from Dinka who fought. And this is the crisis of leadership, which has affected that country up to today. As we talk now, we the SPLA has fought and split up.

Up to today, you do not have a national army in South Sudan. SPLA has been destroyed by Salva Kiir.

Eliud Kibii: *So how many of your comrades who were victimized during that alleged coup are outside the country right now?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: Cirilo, myself, Pagan, Kosti, the former Minister of Finance. We are still out up to now. And there are so many others.

Eliud Kibii: *Didn't the last agreement have a provision for your safe return?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: The last one? We call it Khartoum agreement and we don't see this as an agreement because the deal that we discussed was signed in Addis.

Salva refused to sign in Addis Ababa but due to regional and international pressure, he agreed to sign the agreement in Juba. But he said to everybody in Juba that this agreement is neither the Quran nor the Holy Bible.

Precisely, after few months, he broke the agreement and shooting took place in J1, in Juba because Salva was not convinced of the agreement he signed. The fighting continued until 2018.

In 2018, when these talks took place, we were in Khartoum and recommended that we go back to the previous agreement. But Khartoum, the likes of Bashir, said no and the whole thing ended up being shuttling between Khartoum and Entebbe.

So, we as the South Sudanese did not sit down to discuss and agree on something in Khartoum. It was just Khartoum telling us accept this one, don't accept this, you have to agree to this and that through a lot of intimidation to Riek Machar.

And of course, we said no, we are not going to sit and agree on something we did not discuss. We left Khartoum some of us came to Nairobi, Kampala others went to Addis.

Those of us in Nairobi went to a meeting at Mama Rebecca's house after the signing of the Khartoum agreement. We signed a document delinking ourselves from Khartoum peace talks. We said they were not genuine peace and its implementation would be difficult.

We rejected the Khartoum agreement because there was a lot of mess. It was not practical and that's why we remain outside.

But again, after the signing of that agreement, Salva sent for our colleagues and said he has a special request for us. He wanted us to go to Juba.

I was in Addis and Mama Rebecca called saying we had to send a team to meet Salva. I and Cirilo refused to go.

The team went to Juba and came back but here was practically nothing.

What was the special offer? Some ministerial positions? That's not enough. There are real problems that need to be solved in that country.

Cirilo, Pagan and myself refused to go and went back to Addis.

We remain outside and believe the Khartoum agreement was not really an agreement. It is like Salva telling us come to Juba and keep quiet.

Eliud Kibii: *The Economist says it is Unhappy Birthday to South Sudan. From where you stand, how do you think the problem in South Sudan should be resolved?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: The problem in South Sudan is the problem of leadership. You solve the problem of leadership; you solve all the problems in South Sudan.

But there is every reason for the people of South Sudan to celebrate the 10th year of the Independence Day because our people started fighting the colonial government in 1955.

In Anyanya 1, they didn't gain much they agreed on regional autonomy. That agreement was not

respected and the South Sudanese again started fighting in the 1980s. We achieved the Independence of South Sudan and the people voted on vote given to them after many years of fighting and sacrifice. They voted 97 [er cent for the Independence of South Sudan. We lost so many people and comrades to achieve this independence.

There are some issues we did not solve and which should have been part of the discussion between Juba and Khartoum. The issue if Abyei, Nuba Mountains and the border demarcation between the north and the south are still pending.

The fact that South Sudanese attained their independence is something we continue to celebrate.

One day, were sitting with an old man discussing the problem of South Sudan and he said, "Look, if God wants to punish you, He will give you a bad leader".

Sometimes I want to believe in what the old man said. But still ask myself, what did we do as the people of South Sudan for God to give us a bad leader?

Because during our struggle, on so many years of this struggle, we had the best leader.

John Garang was an excellent and exceptional leader.

Garang was just a normal South Sudanese, or Sudanese and he did not consider himself as coming from this particular tribe or this particular community. He treated people equally.

So when John Garang died, we found ourselves in a serious problem.

Can we give the leadership to Salva? We knew his weakness!

Or do we say no? And if we say no, Salva would create problems and Khartoum could use those differences amongst ourselves against us.

So, we said okay, knowing the weakness of Salva Kiir, we gave him the open support and unshakeable solidarity given his seniority.

The crisis in South Sudan can be solved in a day, if you have the right and strong leader.

But you cannot solve it with Salva Kiir because he destroyed the SPLM, the party we created in 1983.

And you know what Salva did? He organized tribal leaders called the Dinka Council of Elders, who now the one who are taking over the role of the party, the SPLM. They destroyed it.

You have the Dinka Council of Elders from their own communities, and they came to the capital Juba, and they are sitting in Juba running the party running the SPLM. Where in the world can you get such as thing?

I give an example of myself. I come from the community of the Shilluk, from the Kingdom of the Shilluk. The current king was a banker, university graduate. And when the community called him, he removed his suit and tie and put on the Shilluk traditional dress and went to the Shilluk land where he stays. He does not stay in Juba or Marakal.

If the Dinka want to have a Dinka king, we don't have a problem with that. Let them go to the Dinka land. But there is no way that they can come take over the party and assume the role of advising Salva.

So Salva destroyed the party, created these tribal differences and now the Dinka are taking land from other communities. So, you are creating problems in the future even for the Dinka themselves.

It's not a good thing to do. You cannot expect Salva will unite the people of South Sudan and we will not have a country called South Sudan under Salva Kiir. Not until he is gone.

He has destroyed the national army the SPLA, the national security, the national police and the national party, which was the biggest party in South Sudan, the SPLM.

Eliud Kibii: *How entrenched is ethnicity in South Sudan?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: Salva Kiir entrenched it. During all these years of the struggle, the people of South Sudan were united.

By then, you could move from the Ethiopian border to the border of Central Africa Republic and every village you go to, the people would serve you.

When Garang was the leader, there were many commanders from various tribes and could go everywhere to fight. There was nothing called tribalism. But now, it is Salva Kiir who created this [tribalism] in a very serious way.

So now, the people of South Sudan are fighting e.g in the greater Upper Nile, tribes are fighting. Every tribe in South Sudan now has its private army and commanders in chief. So in general, it is Salva Kiir who created this.

Eliud Kibii: *Do you think Riek Machar is a better leader than President Kiir?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: He has never been a leader and I don't want to assume he would be better, unless the people of South Sudan elect him. But there are many people in South Sudan who can be leaders.

However, in comparison with Salva, I think Riek would be better but I don't think he would be better than Garang because he demonstrated his leadership and up to today, people cry, even in the Sudan.

The people will in future decide if they want to work with Riek, but I don't think anybody will vote for Salva again. But there are many people who can lead that country in a better way.

Eliud Kibii: *What do you think about the upcoming election in 2023?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: I don't think there will be an election under Salva Kiir.

What created this problem in 2013 was because Salva was afraid of going for election. The agreement they signed talks of an election but I don't think it will happen.

How do you conduct an election when you do not have national security? When you do not have national army?

Look, we are the only country in the world, if we can call ourselves so, where you have, take an example, Uhuru Park in Nairobi where you have Kenyans running away from President Uhuru Kenyatta and they are being protected by Somalis and Rwandese in the park and Uhuru is sitting at State House. Would Kenyans agree to do this?

This is what is happening in South Sudan. In Juba, you have 200,000 South Sudanese who are running away from Salva Kiir and are being protected by Rwandese, Ethiopian and Kenyan armies in

Marakal, in Bentiu. These are our citizens being protected by regional troops in the capital city.

You have more than two million refugees in Uganda alone, half a million in Kenya, another half a million in Ethiopia and more than three million in Sudan. So, how can you talk about an election. How are you going to organize it? So, these refugees in Uganda, will they vote there for the President who chased them from Juba? This election talk is at best a joke. Nothing will take place. It will not work.

Eliud Kibii: *If there are no foreseeable credible elections and you say there can't be peace under Salva Kiir, so what is the way out?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: There are two options. The first is concerns the region - and I know they have their own problems. But if South Sudan is a member of Igad, EAC and the African Union, the only solution is for the regional bloc and the international community to pressure Salva Kiir to step down. To resign. And he can stay peacefully anywhere in the region or we in South Sudan can forgive him and let him stay in Juba but let the current regime resign and form the government of technocrats that will restructure and lead the country for three to four years or whatever to a credible election. This cannot happen under Salva Kiir.

If that doesn't work for Salva, the only other option is for us the South Sudanese to fight and chase him away from that chair. Otherwise, there will be no election and there will be no peace under Salva. And Salva wants to die on that chair.

So, there is always time for everything but time will come very soon for Salva to go. Either he goes by resigning as I said or we are going to fight him.

Eliud Kibii: *You speak like there is already a plan?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: Yes, it is there. Look, when we went for these peace talks in Rome I told them that if there are any mistakes that I have done in my life, it is to refuse to take up arms from 2014 when we were released from jail. I could have joined Riek or I could have formed a separate front to fight Salva. And there are so many of my colleagues who are calling. So, it is a mistake which I have done almost eight years now. We have been made refugees from the country we liberated, we have been chased from but we will not continue staying in Kenya, Ethiopia or Uganda. This year, we are going to put on our uniform and go back and fight Salva Kiir. And he must go. That country belongs to all of us not to a particular group or leader to destroy. So definitely, we are going to fight him.

Eliud Kibii: *You are confirming there are plans underway?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: Yes, we are working on it and this is what I am saying. We are talking to various SPLA officers from all communities and Salva is going to be shocked very soon. And there are no peace talks that will work with Salva Kiir again and so the only option left to us is to fight him. We are planning, we are organizing and we are ready.

Eliud Kibii: *Could President Salva Kiir be reacting to such plans when he says Uhuru betrayed him when he released you, then detainees, to Kenya only for him to issue you with passports?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: He is always blaming other people. If President Kenyatta were to help us, even with weapons, we would have marched to Juba a long time ago. But Kenyatta said he wants peace in South Sudan and wants a peaceful solution. What did Kenyatta do? Nothing.

Salva is unable to unite his own people and now wants to blame leaders in the region. The region

has told us they can only help us by facilitating talks. No country has given us weapons to fight him.

So, if he is complaining about a passport, that's an assistance he can blame the region for it. Of course, I need a Kenyan passport to go for treatment in South Africa. Is it a crime for Kenya to give me this? You don't go and fight with a passport. So he has failed and just wants to blame other people.

Eliud Kibii: *Do you feel there are people in his government who like you feel he needs to go?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: They are many but there are very few in government who are revolutionaries. But the government in Juba has been taken over by former Khartoum people, the National Congress Party. Those we were fighting. They are the ones who have taken over in Juba, traitor who have blood of the South Sudanese in their hands. We will get them soon. This year, the time of Salva is coming. And it has happened all over the world.

Eliud Kibii: *What message would want to send to the people of South Sudan?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: They should celebrate this Independence Day. From every family, we have lost a child during the struggle. They must always remember they fought and attained their independence. They should be proud of themselves.

And the tragedy we are going through is man-made and Salva will go. And when he goes this year, we will have a strong government of South Sudan.

My message is those who are being misled by Salva Kiir, don't join them We are going to look for them. It happened in Rwanda, Liberia, Sudan and it is now going to happen in South Sudan. Those responsible for the atrocities will be held to account, we are going to arrest them, including Salva Kiir. Either he goes to court at The Hague or arrest him as the Sudanese have arrested Bashir and try him. I would not want to kill him, he must be arrested and taken to court. This is what I have to say.

Eliud Kibii: *And how are the five vice-presidents working with all the divisions?*

Gen Oyay Deng Ajak: There is no government in South Sudan. It is gang of criminals and the five vice presidents, we as the South Sudanese did not discuss and agree on them. Riek was just pushed.

It was Bashir or Museveni who came up with the idea. They are not working; they are not even functioning. One of them asked the President to relieve him of his duties. It is only Salva who is running government alone.

For instance, what is the function of Riek in Juba? His army, which he has been commanding for six, seven years is still out there. How can you be proud of yourself and you sit in the chair as vice president when you leave your own people who have been fighting for you all these years outside and you run to Juba to get money or positions. That is rubbish.

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