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Rural Radicalism in the Capital City: The Impact of Histories of Inequitable Safety on Patterns of Violence

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Abstract

Around the world, armed conflict is increasingly occurring in capital cities and governments are relying on pro-government, rurally recruited, militia to suppress anti-government political violence. Pendle and Maror draw lessons from South Sudan where recruits from rural areas were brought to Juba to help defend the government. Drawing on ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews with combatants, this article uses “rural radicalism” to argue that patterns of violence by these rurally recruited forces were shaped by histories of rural violence over previous decades and can be read to include a political objective that challenges the inequities in safety and security between rural areas and the capital city.

Résumé

Partout dans le monde, les conflits armés se produisent de plus en plus dans les capitales et les gouvernements s'appuient sur des milices progouvernementales recrutées dans les zones rurales pour réprimer la violence politique antigouvernementale. Pendle et Maror tirent les leçons du Soudan du Sud, où des recrues des zones rurales ont été amenées à Juba pour aider à défendre le gouvernement. S'appuyant sur des observations ethnographiques et des entretiens qualitatifs avec des combattants, cet article utilise le « radicalisme rural » pour soutenir que les modèles de violence de ces forces recrutées en milieu rural ont été façonnés par l'histoire de la violence rurale au cours des décennies précédentes et peuvent être interprétés comme incluant un objectif politique qui remet en question les inégalités en matière de sûreté et de sécurité entre les zones rurales et la capitale.

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Resumo

Por todo o mundo, os conflitos armados têm ocorrido cada vez mais em cidades capitais, e os governos recorrem a milícias pró-governamentais, recrutadas nos meios rurais, para reprimir a violência política antigovernamental. Pendle e Maror analisam e retiram ilações do caso do Sudão do Sul, onde foram trazidas para Juba milícias rurais para ajudarem a defender o governo. Com base em observações etnográficas e entrevistas qualitativas, o presente artigo serve-se da ideia de “radicalismo rural” para defender que os padrões da violência exercida por estas forças recrutadas nos meios rurais foram definidos por histórias de violência rural ao longo das últimas décadas e podem ser interpretados como tendo o objetivo político de desafiar as iniquidades verificadas entre a segurança nos meios rurais e a segurança na capital.

Keywords: South Sudan; armed conflicts; violence; capital cities; rural radicalism; patterns of violence

Introduction

In contemporary armed conflicts, rurally recruited combatants play a significant role, whether as rebels, recruits into government armed forces or as militias. With theaters of war often including the capital city, rural recruits are brought to the political and administrative center of the state as part of their military service. In this article we explore how experiences of growing up and living in rural areas, and during certain political economies controlled through the capital city, might shape both these rurally recruited combatants’ understanding of the capital city and their patterns of violence in the capital city.

South Sudan provides an example. In 2013 in Juba (South Sudan’s capital city), a rurally recruited pro-government force were brought by the government to the capital city to support their defense of the city against a nascent armed opposition force, namely the Sudan People’s Liberation Army—In Opposition (SPLA-IO). It has been widely reported that during fighting in the capital city between the government and the SPLA-IO (Johnson 2014), some of these pro-government forces carried out significant violence against civilians (Human Rights Watch 2013; African Union 2014). According to the African Union, civilians “of Nuer ethnicity” were killed, including in door-to-door searches (African Union 2014, 118–19). The rurally recruited pro-government forces that came to Juba in December 2013 had gained military and combat experiences in rural areas of South Sudan over the previous decade, before becoming part of more formal, government aligned forces that fought in 2012 on the South Sudan–Sudan border, and then, in December 2013, in Juba. Many of these recruits were also young children in rural SPLA-controlled areas during the wars of the 1990s and 2000s between the then rebel SPLA and the Sudan government. These wars included significant violence against civilians by the Sudan government, and violence that polarized ethnicities (Jok and Hutchinson 1999; Johnson 2003; Pendle 2023).

It is not only in South Sudan that there has been recent, significant violence against civilians in the capital city by rurally recruited combatants. For example, in Sudan’s capital of Khartoum in 2019, a rurally recruited pro-government militia—the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—violently suppressed bread riots and

later used heavy gunfire and teargas to end non-violent sit-in protests against the army (el Gizouli 2019). Violence in Khartoum by the RSF in 2019 included killings, rape, destruction of property, burning of libraries and targeting of doctors (African Press Organisation 2019). Then, in April 2023, when the RSF launched an urban offensive against the Sudanese army and government, violence against Khartoum residents and infrastructure escalated further (Amnesty International 2023) and brought armed conflict to the capital city on a scale not experienced in a hundred years (de Waal 2023).

In this article, we grapple with the question of why we see these patterns of violence by rurally recruited combatants and armed groups in capital cities. We follow Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood in understanding “patterns of violence” as including the “repertoire, targeting, frequency and technique” of violence (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017). The last two decades have seen a growth in scholarly interest in armed group patterns of violence, including why some armed groups harm civilians, while others show restraint (Terry and McQuinn 2018; McQuinn et al. 2021). Initially, rationalist approaches emphasized the strategic benefits and costs of showing restraint (Kalyvas 2006; Downes 2012; Valentino 2014). More recent literature has instead highlighted more social, historic and cultural factors (Weinstein 2006; Kahl 2007; Stanton 2017).

Our focus on the violence of rurally recruited armed youth in capital cities prompts us to affirm the need for explanations of patterns of violence to pay attention to the politics, aspirations and frustrations (and so political thought) of combatants, as well as the repertoires of violence that have become familiar to them through their own and their families’ life histories as victims, as well as combatants, of various patterns of violence in rural areas. We explore how, in South Sudan, armed violence implemented by the Sudan government in the 1990s and 2000s, alongside contemporary political economies and inequities, shaped patterns of violence a decade later. In addition, a key experience has been the inequities in the distribution of safety and security in the period after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA had ended armed hostilities between the Sudan government and the Southern-based SPLA, and the roadmap in this agreement led to Southern independence in 2011. Plus, in the post-CPA period, there was relative security in the new capital of Juba, and the international community celebrated this as a period of peace. However, rural areas across South Sudan continued to experience a state of “no war, no peace,” and sometimes outright, deadly armed conflict. Rural youth were exposed to extreme and frequently deadly violence, as well as forced into military labor (Pendle 2015; Majok and Kindersley 2019). Their lives were colored by the violence of revenge killings, land conflicts and acting as community defense forces (Jok 2017; Pendle 2020a), as well as the possibility of recruitment into the more formal forces of the SPLA-IO or government (Kindersley and Rolandsen 2017; Majok and Kindersley 2019). In this article, we explore how these recent histories shaped the norms and politics of rural youth and how this shaped violence when these youth fought in the capital city. Other research in northern Africa has highlighted how wealth, and not political power, are often key (Brachet and Scheele 2015). However, for youth in South Sudan, the more fundamental desire for safety and security was pivotal.

We have often missed the politics in patterns of violence because of our assumptions about the forms that “politics” and “political expression” take. Scholars have implicitly assumed that political expression will be verbalized in political slogans and speeches of labor movements, university unions, civil society groups, political parties, or even warring parties. However, we need to recognize that politics can also be expressed implicitly in patterns of violence. Violence, and its patterns, can be an “ordinary” form of political expression, especially in contexts of protracted armed conflict. As Debos (2011, 413) argues, in contexts prone to violent cycles of repression and rebellion, the exercise of violence can become “an ordinary way of expressing contestation.” For many, “peacetime does not equate with non-violence, and war cannot be defined as the mere opposite of peace” (Debos 2011, 410). Instead, there is a continuum, and when violence becomes so embedded in society, violence can be a form of political expression.

Furthermore, in scholarship on rural Africa, there has also been a tendency to not notice rural political action because of the implicit assumption that the rural cannot be political or radical (Mampilly 2023). As Mampilly (2023) describes, this continues Marxist assumptions that rural peasants remain outside market forces and the potential for class consciousness. In analyzing the politics in these patterns of violence, we reiterate scholarship throughout this special issue that highlights how politically active the rural can be (Bolin, Carayannis, Watts and Vlassenroot 2024). Lewis’s recent work on rebel groups in African states from 1997 to 2015 has shown that most rebel groups form in rural areas (Lewis 2023), affirming the need to recognize the political and the radical in the rural.

The rurally recruited armed youth in South Sudan that we focus on have experienced extreme, deadly violence in times of “war” and “peace” over decades and often since childhood. Long histories of repressive violence since the colonial period have shaped rural society in parts of South Sudan and have normalized the exercise of certain repertoires and targets of violence. The Sudan government’s clearing of the oilfields in South Sudan in the 1990s also brought exposure to new, deadly, unrestrained, and ethnicized patterns of violence for Nuer and Dinka communities in Unity State and neighboring areas of Bahr el Ghazal (Jok and Hutchinson 1999; European Coalition on Oil in Sudan 2010). The political economy of the post-CPA era then depended on the militarized labour of youth, especially rural youth, and their frequent exposure to deadly armed conflict (Thomas 2015; Majok and Kindersley 2019). Furthermore, in South Sudan, the political and social space is militarized and civil space is limited (Mampilly 2018). Therefore, in this context, patterns of violence can be seen as an “ordinary way” for armed youth to express their politics.

We conceptually draw upon Weiss’s (1967) concept of “rural radicalism.” Weiss coined the phrase “rural radicalism” to contest the common view that African politics was an affair of an educated, urban elite. According to Weiss, many rural populations, in the post-independence era, had a more radical political vision than their urban counterparts in that they did not simply want to Africanize the existing system but to remake the rules of the game and the political economies that had brutally exploited the rural periphery. The rural

population were radical in that they did not just demand a change of the party or the people in power, but an overhaul of the system itself (Weiss 1967).

Importantly for understanding South Sudan, Weiss's "rural radicalism" challenged the idea that rural protest was just elite driven (Weiss 1967, 185). A prominent explanation of the violence of rurally recruited militia in South Sudan has been that they are elite-manipulated and instrumentally organized for elite political gains (de Waal 2014, 2015; Pinaud 2014, 2020). These arguments have usefully moved beyond explanations of armed conflict that focus on ethnic divisions. However, these elite-driven perspectives "implicitly sketch out a clientelist 'base' with very little agency or critical capacity" (Kindersley 2019, 65). As Tuttle has highlighted, assuming that South Sudanese armed youth are easily manipulated by elites, involves an odd assumption that South Sudanese are naïve (Tuttle 2013). Banégas and Warnier (2001) have described the emergence of a "moral economy of cunning and resourcefulness" in Africa (Brachet and Scheele 2015, 728), which is not completely absent in South Sudan. Yet, the lack of gains in wealth by many who implement and experience South Sudan's worst violence means that there is a need for a better explanation of the violence of rurally recruited armed youth.

Like Weiss, in this article we understand "radicalism" to mean the demand for radical change – not the change of the party and people in power but a change in the system itself. We argue that the system-change enacted through violence by the rural armed youth in Juba was their remaking of the inequitable geographies of safety and insecurity in the post-CPA era in South Sudan that had exposed rural areas to insecurity and armed conflict, while Juba remained relatively safe. In December 2013, the forces that came to Juba inflicted patterns of violence similar to those in the rural areas, levelling up the capital with the rural.

In their account of a violent attack on Malakal (a city in northern South Sudan) by SPLA-IO aligned forces, Stringham and Forney (2017) describe this as an act of the rurally based Nuer White Army rebelling against elites whom they blamed for mounting rural–urban inequalities. NGOs and the government had concentrated resources in cities. They describe violent campaigns as a way to "redistribute wealth by pillaging urban areas" (Stringham and Forney 2017, 117). However, this does not fully explain the violence by pro-government forces in Juba, especially as pillaging was not such a dominant feature of the patterns of violence. In this article we argue that a key element of the violence was not the redistribution of capital and economic resources, but the redistribution and remaking of places of safety and security. The violence in Juba involved a continuity in patterns of violence that youth in rural areas had experienced first-hand through years of war with Khartoum and then after the CPA.

In this article we apply "radicalism" to a *pro-government* force, which seems counterintuitive. These armed forces were brought to Juba to preserve, and not challenge or change, the South Sudanese government. Yet, in this article, we are not primarily focused on why these forces came to Juba. Plus, unlike most examples of rural radicalism, we do not exclude these forces from radicalism despite the lack of explicit political messaging. Instead, we pay attention to the patterns of violence that they inflicted. These rurally recruited armed youth were "radical" not because they were against the government of the day but

because their patterns of violence are best understood as enacting a radical change in the geographies of safety and security in South Sudan. They overturned the inequalities in access to safety and non-violence between the capital city and rural areas by exposing the inhabitants of the capital city to similar patterns of violence that were commonplace in rural areas. This did not directly make the rural into a safer place, but it brought the Juba-based decision makers closer to the consequences of the violence in rural areas.

“Rural” in this article is used in a loose sense to describe people whose histories, and moral and political perspectives, have been fundamentally shaped by experiences in rural areas. We use “rurally recruited” to refer to people who were recruited in these spaces, even if they are now in towns, barracks, and capital cities. Drawing a distinction between the rural and the urban has been common in studies of politics in Africa (Mamdani 2018), although assumptions about a simple distinction can conceal the connected nature of rural violence and protests of the cities (Mkandawire 2002; Kniknie and Büscher 2023).

In this article, we focus on the “capital city” as opposed to the “urban” in general. Goodfellow and Jackman (2023) describe how capital cities are “containers” of both capital and sovereignty and are, therefore, spaces in which authority is increasingly built, contested, maintained, and undone. Importantly for us is also that political elites can often try to create capital cities as a place of safety and security despite ongoing “no war, no peace” and the ordinariness of violence elsewhere in the county. Political violence is increasingly urbanized, and cities, including capital cities, are sites of conflict in contemporary warfare, and wars are not only fought in rural areas (Kaldor and Sassen 2020). At the same time, cities often end up providing a safe environment (Beall et al. 2011; Büscher 2020). In this article, we describe how Juba (the new capital of the new state of South Sudan) was being created as a space of safety, mimicking the historic experiences of the capital of Khartoum, which also did not, for over a hundred years, share the experiences of protracted armed conflict with other areas in the Sudan. We argue that South Sudan was starting to model patterns in Sudan in which governments maintained the dominance of power in the capital partly through the safety of the capital, with political contestation being enacted through violence in more rural areas far from the capital, resulting in significant inequities in security and safety.

This article is based on observations and interviews with men who were recruited in rural Bahr el Ghazal into pro-government forces in the post-CPA era. This includes those recruited as soldiers into the SPLA, but also those recruited into pro-government militia such as the Mathiang Anyoor and other pro-government security forces from the Bahr el Ghazal region (Boswell 2019). Some of these forces have now been absorbed into the formal government security forces. The article is also informed by long-term ethnographic observations and lived experiences by the authors. One author was born in rural Bahr el Ghazal and lived there until he, as a teenager, moved to a refugee camp. He returned to live in Bahr el Ghazal for three years in the post-CPA period and has continued to visit the region regularly since moving to Juba. The other author lived in rural Bahr el Ghazal for four years from 2009 and has continued to visit and research there ever since. We both observed firsthand rural armed conflict and rural

recruitment during this period. One author also conducted over fifty interviews, including with rural armed youth, in Bahr el Ghazal in 2012 and 2013. In 2020, a further thirty qualitative interviews were carried out with serving soldiers who were originally from rural Bahr el Ghazal, and in 2023 discussions were held with over two dozen rural armed youth, women, and chiefs in Bahr el Ghazal. In 2012, 2013, and 2023, this happened to temporarily overlap with recruitment campaigns. While both authors have years of rural experience, as educated people with salaries and the means to travel, neither of us have personally experienced the acute rural frustrations that were conveyed by those we interviewed.

Our interviews and observations focused on Juba, but some of the conversations ended up in a wider discussion about urban centers, and not just Juba itself. There is further work to be done to understand rural politics in South Sudan in relation to urban centers in general, as well as how this relates to the politics of Juba.

Our positionality and friendships in Bahr el Ghazal does mean that we have long rejected colonial-like stereotypes of the naivety of rural combatants; long conversations have shown us the incredible political awareness of many of these combatants and we came to the research with assumptions that they were not politically naïve. At the same time, we have both had deep and long-serving disagreements with many perspectives supported by those we have interviewed and learnt from. This has helped us safeguard against our identities and relationships determining our analysis and conclusions. Importantly, in trying to understand these patterns of violence, we do not condone them.

Firstly, the article will describe the inequitable distribution of insecurity in South Sudan in the post-CPA era. We describe the dangers of the rural, especially for young men, and also how Juba was being made into a space of safety that appeared to be immune from the dangers of the rural. Secondly, we described how rurally recruited soldiers hoped that recruitment itself would provide access to safety, and we document how these hopes were thwarted. Finally, we will discuss the patterns of violence of rurally recruited forces in Juba in December 2013. We describe how these forces used the logics and repertoires of ethnicized violence that were familiar to them from the violence in rural areas over the previous two decades. Their enacting of these logics in the capital city was a radical change as it undid the safety of the capital and violently equalized the previous inequitable distributions of safety.

The Inequitable Distribution of Insecurity: The Making of the Dangers of the Rural

Since the mid-nineteenth century, rural areas of Southern Sudan have long been shaped by brutal armed conflict and militarized labor, including to provide the government, or foreign capital, with security. In the Sudans, the rural and its politics have not been shaped by the absence of the state, contrasting with Lewis's claim that rebel groups form more easily in rural areas because of state absence (Lewis 2023). In the Sudans, it has been the long history of the violence of the state that better explains rebel and radical sentiments (Thomas 2015; Pendle,

2023). From the early 1820s, the Turko-Egyptian rulers expanded their control south into Sudan to acquire resources to service their international debt. This resulted in the reorganization of agriculture in northern Sudan, and violent slave raiding to the south. Each year 10,000–12,000 captured slaves provided labour for the new northern farms (Serels 2013, 20). By the 1840s, traders were developing private slave-raiding militias and *zariba* (fortified camps) in the Southern Sudan (Serels 2013, 21; Leonardi 2015). These *zariba* became the foundations of future towns and cities, and created a long-lasting urban-rural divide in South Sudan (Leonardi 2015). During the Anglo-Egyptian rule of Sudan in 1899–1956, new agriculture schemes formed (such as the cotton-growing Gezira Scheme), as well as a unified grain market around the new capital of Khartoum to support these shifts. A new class in Khartoum became increasingly wealthy but relied on the labor from rural areas. By this period slavery was prohibited, but war and poverty facilitated migrant labor. The Condominium used displays of military might and violence to “pacify” Southern Sudan (Johnson 1997, 2016), but also relied on southern, militarized labor recruited into the army both for its security in the Sudans and later to support its war efforts during World War II.

Since Sudan’s independence in 1956, Southern armed rebels waged war against the Sudan government, including Ananya-I in the 1960s and the SPLA in the 1980s and 1990s. In the 1970s, oil was discovered in rural areas of Southern Sudan. Militia, backed by the Sudan government, cleared rural populations from oilfields, with Unity State being the first to have oilfields violently depopulated (Johnson 2003). The oilfields did not only disturb the pastures and land of those who had lived on the oilfield sites but they also impacted neighboring communities (such as those in eastern Bahr el Ghazal) as the communities around the oilfields had to seek alternative pastures and land (Pendle 2017). For example in the 1990s, there were unprecedented attacks by groups from rural areas around the oilfields against villages in Bahr el Ghazal (Jok and Hutchinson 1999).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the SPLA (the main anti-Khartoum southern rebel group) relied heavily on rural recruitment from Bahr el Ghazal. The youth who remained at home in Bahr el Ghazal were also armed during this period. They were named *titbaai* (protectors of the home) and *titweng* (protectors of the cattle), and became a rurally based, local defense force that provided crucial support to the SPLA (Pendle 2015). Armed conflict was also increasingly ethnicized (Jok and Hutchinson 1999; Pendle 2017)—there was not unity among co-ethnics, but ethnic divisions increasingly shaped targets of violence. Insecurity in rural areas prompted a large number to leave rural homes for waged labor in farms and factories in northern Sudan (Majok and Kindersley 2019). They also fled to refugee camps in East Africa (Grabska 2014; Akoi and Pendle 2021).

In 2005, the Sudan government and the SPLA signed the CPA. This peace agreement made the SPLA the dominant party in the new government of Southern Sudan, and also gave the nascent Southern government money from the oil. While this peace agreement did herald the end of direct SPLA versus Sudan government fighting, for most South Sudanese it resulted in a period of “no war, no peace,” when fears were still high and armed conflict was not uncommon. One cause of the ongoing insecurity was that the CPA gave control of most of South Sudan to the SPLA despite the reality that, at the time, the SPLA

did not control large swathes of South Sudan. President Kiir managed to appease previously anti-SPLA forces by incorporating them into the SPLA and its payroll (de Waal 2014). However, this made the SPLA a large and less politically reliable armed force for Kiir's government. In the post-CPA era, the government therefore continued to use local, and often rurally recruited, armed forces to provide protection to communities and to the government itself. For example, in 2012 when then rebel Peter Gadet attempted to stage a rebellion near the Unity State oilfields, his main confrontation with pro-government forces was with the *titweng* from Bahr el Ghazal, and not the SPLA itself. This reliance on local armed youth was not limited to Bahr el Ghazal. For example, the local forces of the Arrow Boys in Western Equatoria State provided an important defense, for the community and government, against the Lord's Resistance Army. Yet, the importance of this rural, militarized labor often made life for men growing up in rural areas of South Sudan incredibly dangerous.

As well as this continued role protecting communities and governments, other shifts in the political economy made the post-CPA era insecure for rural youth. Firstly, senior government figures who were living in Juba invested significant funds in large cattle herds, and they paid trusted youth, and armed them heavily, to keep their cattle healthy and secure. Cattle were a good financial investment, but could also be used in marriage and as gifts to build local social networks (Pendle 2021). The post-CPA opening-up of cattle trade, both internally and for export, also increased the monetary value of cattle and incentives for raiding. Their high value meant that a typical herd was worth the equivalent of tens of thousands of US dollars. If cattle were lost due to ill health or raiding, those looking after the cattle also felt an obligation to replenish them through raiding, further exposing these youth to armed conflict.¹ Secondly, relative peace during the CPA period brought new opportunities for investment and started to change ideas of land ownership and increase the value of land (Cormack 2016; Leonardi and Santschi 2016; Majok and Kindersley 2019). New ambiguities and uncertainties prompted rural armed conflict over arable land, and also over pastures and grazing routes (Cormack 2016; Pendle 2023). Leaders, often Juba-based, claimed rural land if they could mobilize a military force to defend it, again increasing the armed conflict and violence in rural life.

Patterns of violence in rural South Sudan in the post-CPA era included the killing of non-combatants, and the burning of homes, crops, and property, as well as the theft of cattle. In the post-CPA era, revenge was a dominant logic justifying armed conflict and deadly violence in rural areas. As people could not access judicial redress for grievances, including post killings, revenge as a form of self-help justice became common place (Pendle 2018). Revenge was not only against the perpetrator but could also be carried out against their wider social group. Historically, the wider social group was the clan, but revenge against any co-ethnic became seen as increasingly legitimate (Jok and Hutchinson 1999; Pendle 2018, 2020b). This shift to seeking revenge against the broader group of co-ethnics marked a radical change in the norms of revenge, and also made life much more dangerous.

Rural youth in the post-CPA era were frustrated and often sought out ways to escape this insecurity. For example, in 2012, there was a case in the local chiefs'

courts in Bahr el Ghazal where a *titweng* that had recently fought to defend the community against rebel leader Peter Gadet, burned his brother's house to the ground. When the court asked the *titweng* why he had burned the house, he explained that he had burned the house of his brother's second wife because his brother had used the family cattle to marry a second wife for himself before he had been allowed to marry a first. The *titweng* said that he was desperate to marry, as if he was married and had children, he would no longer have the same social responsibility of serving on the frontline to protect the community. Unmarried young men have the primary responsibility for military defense of the community. He explicitly equated his lack of marriage to a death sentence.²

The Inequitable Distribution of Insecurity: The Making of the Safety of the Capital

Since the nineteenth century, there has been a long history of the capital city in Sudan (i.e. Khartoum) being a place of safety, despite simultaneous violence in rural areas. Khartoum (which was also the capital of Southern Sudan until South Sudan's 2011 independence) gained wealth and power through the violent exploitation of resources, such as labor, in rural areas (Serels 2013; Thomas 2015; Majok and Kindersley 2019), but itself managed to avoid armed conflict. From the 1990s, Khartoum quickly grew as a wealthy oil capital (Choplin and Franck 2010). While this access to oil involved significant armed conflict in the oilfields, this armed conflict remained far from Khartoum. Therefore, the last 120 years of Sudan's history have been of inequitable spatial patterns of insecurity with rural areas experiencing insecurity and violence, while life in the capital is relatively safe.

Juba has a different recent history. Juba, which was initially just one of eight provincial capitals, grew rapidly during the first civil war in the 1960s, and again during the peace of the late 1970s which created a new regional Government of Southern Sudan with its capital in Juba. By 1983, the population of Juba was nearly 84,000. During the SPLA-GoS war from 1983, Juba became a garrison for the Sudanese army—the Sudan Armed Forces. Across South Sudan, until the early 2000s, many of the larger towns were controlled by GoS while the SPLA had dominance in many rural areas (Nyaba 1997, 25; Madut-Arop 2006, 86). The 1992 SPLA attacks on Juba highlighted the urban centers were not perfectly safe, but the 1980s and 1990s saw massive displacement to Juba for safety, away from even more violent rural areas. At the same time, for those who could be mistaken for being SPLA-aligned, rural areas were much safer (Cormack 2014).

From 2005, Juba became the capital of Southern Sudan and, therefore, the likely capital of the newly independent South Sudan, which was realized in 2011. From 2005, Juba also started to benefit from oil money. According to the CPA, the Southern government received 50 percent of the oil revenues, and the spending of the oil money was concentrated in Juba (Thomas 2015, 146). The politico-military elite of South Sudan rapidly shifted to Juba, taking up positions in the national government and security sector.³ Other South Sudanese also moved to Juba, including those returning from war-time exile. The 2009 census counted

372,000 people living in Juba (Thomas 2015, 146). For the first post-CPA years, South Sudan looked as if it would mimic the geographies of security in Sudan, with the new capital city of Juba transformed into a place of safety akin to Khartoum. This created a space in South Sudan in which the leadership, and their children and property, could be safe from armed conflict. Armed youth in Bahr el Ghazal in the post CPA years commonly lamented that the political leaders, “people in Juba,” included those who incited violence in rural areas, kept their own children far away from the dangers, in the safety of Juba or even Nairobi.⁴

One important way in which the safety of Juba was reinforced was through claims that violence which was morally acceptable or even required in rural areas, was not morally acceptable or expected in Juba. This included both ethnic dynamics and logics of revenge. For example, despite Nuer–Dinka violence in rural areas of South Sudan, and despite political leaders in Juba inciting this violence, there was not widespread ethnic violence in Juba until December 2013. It was common for Nuer and Dinka in Juba to work together, study together, eat together, and marry. The rules of revenge also did not apply. For many communities in South Sudan, after the CPA armed conflict was mobilized around the notion of revenge and the moral obligation to seek justice for the dead (Pendle 2018). According to various South Sudanese moral and spiritual logics, eating with people that you have a war or feud with can result in deadly moral pollution and is avoided at great cost (Hutchinson 2001; Pendle 2023). Yet, in Juba, people kept eating together across ethnic and clan lines, irrespective of feuds in rural areas.⁵ Revenge against the perpetrator’s co-ethnics and even clan members were not carried out in Juba. Juba was socially and morally constructed by its inhabitants as set apart from the moral norms and the violence of the rural areas. It was a place where the logics that morally justified armed conflict in rural areas did not apply, and violence was less.

At the same time, we need to be clear that Juba is not detached from insecurity and violence. People in Juba have been entangled with violence and insecurity in rural areas and have played key roles in extractive economies (whether for oil, timber, gold, or charcoal) that have prompted violent expressions of rural grievances. People in Juba, on all sides of conflict and the political spectrum, have brought bullets and guns for their brothers in rural areas, and some politico-military leaders have returned to their home areas to incite violence. Many people living in the post-CPA Juba would have also experienced armed conflict in the decades before, and experienced violent crime in Juba since the CPA. They also have close relatives in rural areas, which heightens their concern with rural violence. However, in the post-CPA years, before 2013, Juba offered people and their families a safer place to live.

At the same time, even if Juba was safer, it was not seen as more moral. Many soldiers that we spoke to narrated that it was only when they had left rural areas and lived in the cities that they realized that things were not freely available and shared, and were acquired through monetized market logics and not the logics of sharing with kin that still dominated in rural settings.⁶ As one soldier explained, “One difference is that people eat what they have worked for in town but in rural areas people share food. Even strangers are given food to eat but in town, you only eat what you have worked for.”⁷ There were benefits to the moral logics of

the cities. One soldier narrated fond memories of laboring for an income in textile factories in Khartoum.⁸ He enjoyed having money to use to buy clothes without having to share it. However, people often spoke of how this limited the morals of the town and left people without moral obligation. “In towns you eat alone”⁹—something reprehensible in rural areas. This lack of care for others was seen as seeping into the urban-led politics of violence. Rural youth spoke of the selfishness of Juba, and the selfishness of Juba-based leaders who would incite violence to access land, cattle and resources, while ensuring that they and their families were far from the dangers.¹⁰

Rurally Recruited Combatants' Perceptions of Juba and the City

Many people living in rural, post-CPA South Sudan, would never come to Juba (Rift Valley Institute 2018), so perceptions were formed from experience but also imaginaries formed at a distance. Juba, as well as other towns, were seen as a space of economic and symbolic opportunity. The soldiers that we spoke to remembered, as they grew up in rural areas, longing for the things of the town and access to money and items in the markets. Soldiers spoke of how, before they had ever visited towns, they had been jealous of the clothes and education of those who came from the towns. As one soldier described, “I was jealous when I saw people who came from towns with new things like clothes and shoes or sandals.”¹¹ Clothes bought from markets were not just about wealth but also carried symbolic significance. As one soldier narrated, his proudest memory was when his father brought him clothes for his birthday.¹²

Soldiers that we interviewed often vividly remembered their first travel to Juba. One recalled how his family even sacrificed a large goat to celebrate his first arrival in Juba.¹³ The reality was that Juba was not devoid of poverty. However, urban poverty was often invisible in rural areas. Many South Sudanese who were living in the towns, even if they wanted to visit familiar rural areas, avoided travelling outside of Juba when they had no money to take to relatives and friends as this would cause them shame.¹⁴ This self-limiting of travel until resources were available perpetuated ideas of Juba as wealthy.

People also left to Juba for safety. When there was armed conflict, people in Juba would stay away. Plus, people with resources to travel and relatives to stay with in Juba, would travel to Juba if it was safe to do so. The *titweng* would mock some of the local educated youth who did not fight, and those who travelled to Juba to avoid fighting.

Military Recruitment as Access to Safety

Our interviews suggest that a major reason for voluntary recruitment into more formal armed forces has been the promise of safety. Military recruitment provides safety in South Sudan when it offers access to education. Education does not only potentially bring employment and money, but also allows people to avoid the ongoing violence of rural life. This is partly as education might allow them to earn enough money to migrate to the towns but also as, in rural areas,

most of the time, educated youth are not expected to take up arms to defend the community; they contribute to the community in other ways, such as through their jobs and salaries. As recruitment into pro-government armed forces offered the potential of salaries, it therefore offered potential access, for themselves and their families, to better education. Although patterns of revenge violence are now changing, until recently, and still in much of Bahr el Ghazal, educated youth were also not seen as legitimate targets of revenge.

As one soldier described, “There are those who join willingly because they are frustrated with life; they either lack support for their education or they lack food in their homes. So, they see the military as an opportunity to get government salary.”¹⁵ As another recruit described, “There are many other boys who join alone because they don’t have school fees so they think they will afford their school fees if they join the army. They join the army in the hope that their salary would be enough to pay school fees and support their brothers and sisters or parents. Then they will find a way to be safe.”¹⁶

Furthermore, participation in government security forces brings young men closer to the government and to the opportunities of the town and Juba. The army offered opportunities for social mobility. Recruits often included young people from some of the poorest families who gained opportunities for influence and social mobility, as well as income, through recruitment. For example, one interviewee spoke of how his seniors had recognized his abilities and promoted him to the Department of Military Education despite his being from a poor family.¹⁷ The interviewee described how this social mobility took people away from the dangers of rural settings and the front line, to a government desk job.

Despite urban imaginaries and hopes about the opportunities through military recruitment, over the last decade, soldiers were increasingly, quietly but explicitly, frustrated at the lack of realization of these hopes despite the heavy costs and risks they have endured. Soldiers explicitly discussed how their dreams and hopes for the future had been lost. “There are no opportunities for better education in South Sudan, and for this reason, many children including myself lost our dreams.”¹⁸ Another soldier boldly stated, “We don’t have any futures at all.”¹⁹ Another spoke about how, “I have learned that there is nothing good in the army.” This serving soldier described the army as a hole which he had fallen into, and that he hoped his family would now learn to not fall into.²⁰

One soldier narrated his childhood dream to work for NGOs. “I remember vividly when the humanitarian assistance was provided during the Bahr el Ghazal famine of 1998. I was very young. Many other children and I could envy humanitarian workers of that time ... I had hoped to acquire better education and work with humanitarian organizations to provide services and humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable people in the communities. I feel bad now that all that I had hoped for has completely failed.”²¹

Other frustrations were specifically against the experience of the army. Kindersley has described how many South Sudanese understand military service as entering a social contract with the government including care after injury, sickness, and retirement. The government’s failure to meet these expectations has prompted much criticism in Bahr el Ghazal (Kindersley 2022, 183). Since 2015, as the real value of salaries has declined because of hyperinflation, this

frustration has grown further.²² In 2020, when we were interviewing, soldiers were reporting salaries of 1000 SSP (less than 4 USD) per month, and these salaries often were only coming every six months.²³ This could buy just one plate of food in a local restaurant. Many soldiers have opted to go home to open phone charging shops, work in shops, labor on farms, or return to cattle herding. A common income earner for soldiers without salaries is charcoal production.²⁴ As much of this alternative labor takes them to rural areas, they can remain exposed to militarization and violence there too.

Another soldier described how, “If you meet them on the road, you will find that they are very hungry. You can see it from their bodies. They lack good army uniforms. They don’t have salary. Their families are dying of hunger. Their children cannot acquire education because they don’t have money to school them. They cannot feed them or treat them if they are sick.”²⁵ As education was associated with being able to escape militarized rural life, the lack of education meant that soldiers could foresee their children also growing up into a violent, militarized adolescence.

“The army right now does not have enough food to sustain them. Like now, I cannot afford a soap to wash my uniforms. My children do not have food on the table because my salary is not enough, and it is not even there.”²⁶ The army might have appeared like a way to access money, the city, education, Juba, and safety. However, for most soldiers, throughout the post-CPA period and into the contemporary period, this promise was not realized.

Violence in Juba in December 2013

In December 2013, combatants recruited in Bahr el Ghazal were brought by the government to help its defense in Juba. The government needed support as the army was splitting apart (Johnson 2014). South Sudan’s first election since independence was planned for 2015, and the leadership of the SPLA/M was meeting in Juba to decide their presidential candidate and, therefore, the likely future president. Political tensions grew as Riek Machar (former vice president) challenged Salva Kiir for this position. On December 15, Machar and his group had left the party convention in protest about how voting would take place (African Union 2014). On the same day, violence broke out in the Presidential Guard and, almost, instantaneously, SPLA soldiers divided based on whether their history in the 1990s/2000s was with the SPLA or with other anti-SPLA forces (Johnson 2014). Violence in Juba quickly escalated as soldiers fought over the armories.

By December 2013, a force recruited from Bahr el Ghazal (the home region of President Kiir and many of his colleagues) was stationed in proximity to Juba (Pendle 2015; Boswell 2019). These forces had been recruited in rural and quasi-rural areas of Bahr el Ghazal in 2012, and included former armed cattle-keepers such as those who had fought against Peter Gadet in 2012 (Pendle 2015). During the armed conflict with Peter Gadet, those who mobilized them to violence presented Nuer as synonymous with the political opposition. Songs were composed against the Nuer, and histories reminded people of the deadly attacks by

Nuer forces in the 1990s. Many combatants remembered these deadly attacks as part of their own childhood experiences. Personal histories of violence had reshaped their understanding of ethnicity (Appadurai 1998; Jok and Hutchinson 1999). The lack of reconciliation with the Nuer in the post-CPA era reinforced this polarized, violent, ethnicized relationship (Pendle 2017, 2018). After these combatants were recruited into more formal forces, they had served as part of the defense forces for South Sudan during a short conflict with northern Sudan over the Panthou oil-rich border region in 2012. Then, despite this service, the SPLA high command had refused to incorporate this force into the SPLA.²⁷

To protect itself, on December 16, 2013, the government brought this force into Juba. The pro-government forces being brought to Juba made clear to soldiers that their army membership was not going to allow them to avoid the dangers of armed conflict. People speculated, from the first night of fighting, that a larger war had started. The recruits entered Juba with renewed disappointment that a Juba-based elite was exposing them to more danger. This continued in the coming years of the war. As one interviewee said, “When we went to Jonglei state in 2014, we were about 1,400. Sadly, over half of us lost our lives there. This is a senseless war that our people are waging against each other. Thousands of Nuer white army lost their dear lives there also. Young people should just open their eyes and see that politicians are just finishing us while their own children are abroad in schools.”²⁸

Acts of violence, including against civilians, were carried out by some pro-government forces (African Union 2014, 140). The numbers that are thought to have died vary significantly, with the South Sudan National Human Rights Commission saying that “more than 600” died, while communities that fled claimed that 15,000–20,000 Nuer were killed (African Union 2014, 118). According to the African Union’s Commission of Inquiry and Human Rights Watch, it was clear that some pro-government security forces targeted Nuer soldiers and civilians (Human Rights Watch 2013; African Union 2014, 118). As the Commission writes, “Violence spread to various neighborhoods in Juba” as pro-government forces “conducted house-to-house searches, killing Nuer soldiers and civilians in and near their homes.” It is reported that some were arrested and killed elsewhere (African Union 2014, 119). Symbols of education, such as glasses and universities, were not targeted in Juba in 2013, as has happened in Khartoum.

Significantly these rurally recruited youth brought to Juba ethnicized violence that they had experienced in the periphery. In Juba beforehand, political divisions were not being emphasized as polarized around ethnic lines; the competing groups for the SPLA leadership involved a mixed ethnic representation. It was not the case that those living in Juba, including the leaders, had not historically experienced ethnic violence, and there were some tensions in Juba around land and ethnicity. Yet, many actors in Juba in the post-CPA years had tried to create the city as a space without ethnic targeting. However, as discussed above, since the 1990s, armed conflict had been increasingly ethnicized and targeted civilians against civilians in rural areas. Both the combatants and the individuals that commanded them in Juba in December 2013 had lost civilian family members, and even old grandparents, in armed conflict

between Nuer and Dinka groups in rural areas. In Juba in December 2013, the ethnicized targets of violence in rural areas were brought to Juba. Civilians were targeted based on ethnicity and these pro-government forces assumed political alliances based on ethnicity. This violently and radically reshaped Juba from a place where ethnicity potentially had less weight, to a city shaped by the new political relevance of ethnicity. Plus, through their violence they undid the capital as a place of safety.

This continuity in the targets of violence between the rural and the urban raises the question of whether this consistency was based on combatants applying repertoires based on familiarity and normalized moral logics of violence, or whether it was an intentional, political choice based on radical politics. Interviewees were acutely aware that people tried to work by different moral logics in Juba. They explicitly spoke about how acts of violence in Juba in December 2013 created a consistent moral logic with rural areas. They described how they needed to consistently apply the moral logics of the rural areas to Juba.²⁹

The violence in Juba in 2013 has not been the only way that people from rural South Sudan have questioned the moral distinction of Juba and its claim to be a discrete moral space. For example, in the 2020s, the governor and a powerful Dinka priest (spear master) banned alcohol in Lakes State (southeastern Bahr el Ghazal). In the post-CPA era, the rural youth in Lakes State had been encouraged by elites to drink alcohol to make them braver in battle. However, widespread use of alcohol had resulted in actions that escalated conflict and which people now wanted to end.³⁰ The priest cursed anyone who violated this alcohol prohibition, with death being the punishment for violation. A question arose of whether this prohibition would apply to people from Lakes State when they were residing in Juba, or whether the space of Juba was a distinct moral and spiritual place where the curse would not reach. There were no government laws in Juba prohibiting the consumption of alcohol. Initially there was uncertainty. However, a current popular story in Lakes State recalls how a man from Lakes State in Juba had drunk alcohol and immediately died. They blamed his death on the man violating the alcohol prohibition and, therefore, experiencing the curse of the priest. The danger of the curse for prohibited acts was not limited to rural areas but applied in Juba too. There was a desire for Juba to not be morally discrete from Lakes.

Many of the soldiers that we spoke to claimed that they still tried to uphold the moral logics of their rural, home communities.³¹ They spoke of still believing in the cosmologies and priests of their home areas that could punish, through the curse, immoral behavior. They argued that the violence they committed in Juba and other towns was not counter to the moral logics of violence at home. One soldier described how he would only be immoral if he became like "corrupt officials in the government offices."³² However, over time, the debates continue. Many of these soldiers now live in Juba and have moved away from the moral logics of rural areas. The moral logics around ethnic violence in Juba are also changing.

Conclusion

“Rural radicalism” has been an important lens for unpicking the reasons for rural mass movements, protests, and revolts. Dissatisfied with the political and economic context, as well as the political rules of the games, for decades rural masses have self-mobilized to contest prevailing regimes. Understandably, pro-government armed forces have not been considered from a rural radicalism perspective. As protectors of the government, they appear to essentially be conservative, and not radical, forces. However, in South Sudan in recent years, we have seen unprecedented violence in Juba by pro-government, rurally recruited militias. Rural radicalism allows us to understand how the patterns of violence carried out by these rural recruits, while not challenging the government of the day, can pose a more radical, moral challenge to the political economy and political geographies of safety that have dominated since the colonial era. This radical politics has not necessarily motivated all violence, but it can help explain some patterns of violence. In South Sudan, paying attention to the inequities in security, and contrasting the safety of Juba with dangers of rural areas, helps us understand the deep-seated and growing grievances against Juba by rural youth.

Different armed groups around the world have different levels of control over the patterns of violence inflicted by their members (Terry and McQuinn 2018). The politics of political leaders and military commanders shapes patterns of violence. However, combatants who implement violence also have a role in shaping these patterns. Paying attention to their motivations, frustrations, hopes, and politics can help us better understand key details and features of the patterns of violence that they inflict, including against civilians.

There is much more long-term work needed to fully understand the politics of patterns of violence in capital cities and patterns of violence carried out by rurally recruited combatants. There is also more work needed to understand if this research in South Sudan can help explain the patterns of violence by rurally recruited armed forces in Sudan and further afield. Paying attention to patterns of violence can help us unpick if there is a radical politics at play.

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Notes

1. Interview with cattle camp youth at a cattle camp in Lakes State, September 2012.
2. Court observation, paramount chief's court, Bahr el Ghazal, 2012
3. This is based on news coverage at the time, as well as observations of individuals in this elite that we know more personally.
4. Interviews with *titweng* in 2012 in Bahr el Ghazal.
5. Observations during meals in restaurants in Juba in 2012 and 2013.

6. Interview soldier D, September 11, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka; Interview soldier E, August 29, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
7. Interview soldier F, August 27, 2020, Gogrial (South Sudan), in Dinka.
8. Interview soldier D, September 11, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
9. Interview soldier G, August 27, 2020, Gogrial (South Sudan), in Dinka.
10. Discussions with a dozen *titweng* and half-a-dozen chiefs, Bahr el Ghazal, 2012.
11. Interview soldier G, August 27, 2020, Gogrial (South Sudan), in Dinka.
12. Interview soldier G, August 27, 2020, Gogrial (South Sudan), in Dinka.
13. First hand observations and experiences of friends in Juba in 2017–19.
14. Conversations from people in Juba from Bahr el Ghazal, 2014.
15. Interview soldier I, August 9, 2020, Gogrial (South Sudan), in Dinka.
16. August 31, 2020, SPLA soldier, NBeG.
17. Interview soldier E, August 29, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
18. Interview soldier D, September 11, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
19. Interview soldier K, August 29, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
20. Interview soldier A, August 31, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
21. Interview soldier F, August 27, 2020, Gogrial (South Sudan), in Dinka.
22. Conversation with a soldier in Juba, October 18, 2020 (Juba).
23. Interview soldier A, August 31, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka; Interview soldier C, August 29, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
24. Interview soldier J, August 28, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
25. Interview soldier B, August 31, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
26. Interview soldier A, August 31, 2020, Aweil (South Sudan), in Dinka.
27. Key informant interview with someone senior in the SPLA in 2013, interview in August 2014.
28. Interview with serving soldier in Aweil, September 2020, in Dinka.
29. Interviews with a small groups of soldiers, August 2020.
30. Interviews and focus group discussions with fourteen *gelweng* (equivalent of *titweng*) and three women in Lakes State in December 2023.
31. Interview with serving soldier in Aweil, September 2020, in Dinka.
32. Interview with serving soldier in Aweil, September 2020, in Dinka.

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