

Is the Media Under Siege in South Sudan?

“You have been talking about the money being stolen in corruption, is it your father’s money that was stolen? Why do you like to speak every time on all these issues and who mandates you to speak on behalf of the people of South Sudan?” Demanded the [Kidnappers](#) of Deng Athuai Mawiir.

By PaanLuel Wël, Washington DC, USA, Planet Earth

As South Sudanese were celebrating [the first anniversary of the independence of the Republic of South Sudan](#) on July 9th, 2011, [Deng Athuai Mawiir](#) was fighting for his dear life at the [Juba Teaching hospital](#). Mr. Mawiir, the Chairperson of the South Sudan Civil Society Alliance, was [kidnapped by unknown people](#) on the 4th of July in Juba, South Sudan. He was lured into a “green-blue” car, blindfolded with his hands tied behind him and then ferried to an unknown location where he was repeatedly tortured till July 7, 2012 when [he was dumped on the Juba-Bor highway](#) in a sack. According to [Sudan Radio Services](#), Mr. Mawiir led “the activists that marched to South Sudan’s parliament demanding the government publish the names of the officials alleged to have stolen a total of \$4 billion since 2005.”

In a [press statement condemning](#) the abduction and torturing of Deng Athuai, South Sudan Civil Society Alliance declares, “it was because of Alliance’s outspokenness towards just and democratic governance including a [fight against corruption](#) which Alliance leadership under Mr. Athuai has been spearheading.” Undeterred, the Alliance further reiterates their calls “on the office of the president and [Anti-Corruption Commission](#) to reveal the names of the 75 corruption suspects and be taken to face justice in the Court of law.”

May 15, 2012, the police in Lakes State’s capital Rumbek [arrested Ms. Ayak Dhieu Apar](#)—the Radio Rumbek 98 FM journalist. She was detained for hosting a live radio talk show with the title “How Could Public Respect Police?” which drew in callers, questioning the conduct and competence of the police. Hardly amused, the police moved in and arrested Ms. Ayak, accusing her of insulting them. The deafening outcry from the public compelled the state police to release her two days later without charges.

[April 23rd, 2010](#), Mr. Bonifacio Taban was arrested for documenting “general unrest across Bentiu town after the National Elections Commission announced that Taban Deng won the governor seat.” Upon release, he was fired from his Bentiu FM radio job. [June 3rd, 2012](#), Mr. Taban was again

“detained and questioned by South Sudan’s army...in relation to an article published on 31 May: [‘Over 500 SPLA widows complain of ill-treatment.’](#) The article...angered the military as some of the women interviewed accused South Sudan’s army (SPLA) of not providing them with adequate compensation for the death of their husbands. Military widows, or those

dependent on them, are supposed to receive a one-off payment, which is the equivalent [of] half a year's salary...the SPLA were also angered that the figure of 500 widows implied that more soldiers died in the recent border conflicts with Sudan than the military had previously acknowledged.”

February 06, 2012, [Mading Ng'or Akech](#)—the New Sudan Vision Editor-in-Chief and the host of the popular 'Wake Up Juba' show on Bakhita FM—was [assaulted and humiliated at South Sudan's parliament](#). According to a journalist who witnessed the scuffle in the August House, Mr. Mading “was manhandled by the security guys who tore his trousers to the extent of nearly exposing his underpants to the public.”

Just last month—June of 2012, Mayol Kuch, a South Sudanese American who was on a family visitation in South Sudan, [was detained and beaten to death by SPLA soldiers](#) in Bor, Jonglei State. The soldiers suspected him of having participated in “the violence that followed disputed elections in the village for chief of the Adol community” in which two people lost their lives. The case is yet to be solved, two months after it occurred. Left in limbo, his young wife is unable to bring herself to comprehend how the SPLA soldiers that liberated the country could be responsible for the death of her beloved, newly-wedded husband.

According to Biel Boutros—the Secretary General and Spokesperson of the South Sudan Civil Society Alliance ([SSCSA](#)) and the Executive Director of South Sudan Human Rights Society For Advocacy ([SSHURSA](#))—the government of South Sudan has repeatedly failed to pass and enact media laws on the South Sudanese constitutional right of access to information, Freedom of the Press and freedom of speech, seven years after the formation of the Government of South Sudan in 2005.

Echoing the same sentiment, Dr. Hakim Moi—the Executive Director of The Association for Media Development in South Sudan ([AMDISS](#))—adds that the three media bills (the Right to Information Bill, South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation Bill and Media Authority Bill) have stalled between the offices of the Ministry of Information, Council of Ministers and South Sudan National Legislative Assembly.

This premeditated failure by [South Sudan National Legislative Assembly](#) (SSNLA) to pass those three media bills on Freedom of the Media has vastly undermined not only the viability but also the independence of the Freedom of the Press in South Sudan. Most worryingly, the absence of a constitutionally mandated media law has allowed the new government of South Sudan to borrow from and inherit Khartoum's old oppressive practices of unlawful detention and harassment of journalists, human rights activists and other freethinking public intellectuals.

Mr. [Biel Boutros](#) is convinced that:

“such acts of arresting [journalists] plus many more unconstitutional acts in the hands of our law enforcement agencies can hardly be distinguished from the evils for which South Sudan took up arms for against Khartoum...It is so

sad that most of our institutions are doing exactly what caused South Sudan to secede from North Sudan.”

The SPLM/A, the ex-rebel movement currently running the new Republic of South Sudan, has not always been hostile to the media, however. In fact, during the war, media campaigns and propaganda were all part and parcel of the Movement. Under SPLM/A ‘liberated areas’ were found prominent South Sudanese journalists and writers such as [Atem Yaak Atem](#), [Jacob Akol](#), and [Joseph Malath Lueth](#) among others. Even in Khartoum, [Alfred Taban](#) of Khartoum Monitor, [Arop Madut of Sudan Heritage](#), and [Nhial Bol](#) of the Citizen Newspaper were SPLM/A’s darlings during the war for South Sudan’s independence owing to the vigorous media campaigns they fearlessly waged against successive Khartoum regimes on behalf of the marginalized people of the Sudan. [Dr. John Garang](#), the late leader of the SPLM/A, was a shrewd and cunning strategist who successfully incorporated and utilized local and international press such as the BBC as a conduit to wage psychological warfare on Khartoum as well as to seek and enlist international sympathies for his cause. Even today in Juba, the [nouveau riche SPLM/A generals and ministers](#) cannot get enough of media attention particularly when it is favorable to them.

But that symbiotic relationship between the media and the former rebels dramatically shifted after the SPLM/A assumed power in Juba and [commenced acting like the old Sudanese regime](#) in relation to the news media. The first casualty was none other than Nhial Bol Aken, the Editor-in-Chief of Citizen Newspaper and the former darling of the SPLM/A during the war. The motto of the Citizen Newspaper—“Fighting Corruption and Dictatorship”—places it squarely in the crosshairs of the SPLM/A generals because [corruptions and dictatorship](#) have become the pillars of SPLM leadership in Juba. In 2007, Bol was arrested after his newspaper exposed a “wasteful spending at the finance ministry, which purchased 153 cars for government officials.” [According to Aljazeera](#), the price tag was \$60 million—a staggering \$400,000 per vehicle.

On June 12, 2011, just before South Sudan independence, [Mr. Nhial Bol](#) “was arrested [again] on his way from a dinner party organized by the British Consulate in Juba at a hotel called Da Vinci, south of Juba’s main town...[and was] threatened to back down from his activity or risk dying before July 9”—South Sudan Independence Day. [On October 1, 2011](#), Mr. Bol was arrested for the fourth time by police before being released “following his newspaper’s investigations into the business dealings” of a Warrap state minister, Joseph Malek Arop, who was reported to have unlawfully acquired 10% stake in the Chinese oil company Tesco South Sudan Ltd.

So routine have Mr. Bol’s summons, arrests and detentions become that he has [developed a philosophy](#) for it:

“I have been arrested and detained 38 times since 2000. As regards summons by the security agents, I have lost count of them. Sometimes they

would summon me four times a day to their offices for questioning, before releasing me. It's part of the game — they are trying to frustrate us.”

The other journalist who has received his fair share of the violence against Free Press is [Mr. Manyang Mayom](#) of Sudan Tribune:

“In February 2008, Mayom was badly beaten by a militia loyal to Paulino Matip whose soldiers had merged with the SPLA...has been beaten, arrested, intimidated and harassed on numerous occasions by security services in Southern Sudan while investigating sensitive stories...There were occasions in which Manyang Mayom was so badly beaten; he had to be taken to the Sudanese capital Khartoum for treatment, with several repercussions with regards to his injured kidneys. He has also been accused of being a spy as well...His bravery and commitment to the Freedom of the Press was recognized when he was awarded for his ‘commitment to free expression and courage in the face of political persecution’ with a Hellman/Hammett grant by Human Rights Watch on August 4, 2010.”

Sometimes, even a [single piece of article in a newspaper](#) is sufficient enough to land a writer in prison. For example, [Dengdit Ayok and Ngor Arol Garang](#) of The Destiny Newspaper [were forcefully detained on November 05, 2011](#), over a column article in The Destiny written by Dengdit Ayok, questioning the rationale behind [President Kiir's daughter's marriage to a foreigner](#). As reported by the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), Gen. Akol Koor, the Director General of the South Sudan's National Security Services, faulted the two gentlemen of “non-adherence to the media code of conduct and professional ethics and of publishing illicit news that was defamatory, inciting, and invading the privacy of personalities.”

Similarly, [Dr. James Okuk](#)—a former ambassador to Brazil—was arrested on October 21, 2011, for allegedly “writing against President Salva Kiir on the internet.” Of the five articles assembled by the Security Agents, the most damning one was an article entitled “[South Sudan Paradox: Joyful Independence, Sorry Leadership](#)” penned on the eve of South Sudan independence. And just like the case of Ngor Garang and Dengdit Ayok, Dr. James Okuk was released too without charges but with a stern warning to moderate his views and behave himself well.

[In January 2012](#), the New Times editor, Richard Mogga and his counterpart, Badru Mulumba, were quietly “picked up by people claiming to be police.” According to [Brian Adeba](#), a Canadian-based South Sudanese journalist, Mr. Badru Mulumba was reportedly accused of “defaming [minister] Jemma Nunu in Juba.” As a custom in South Sudan, both gentlemen were later freed without charges filed.

The [flight of South Sudanese journalists is well captured by Ojja William Benjamin](#), a freelance journalist from the Eastern Equatoria State:

“It is becoming a habit these days that journalists are picked up and arrested by the powerful individual government officials and released without charges after spending long times in jails. This is not acceptable. The government needs to stop this practice...I thought journalists in Juba were more safe [than] those of us in the bush. Some of us in the states are arrested even for something [we] did not do because of being a journalist. Hearing the title [that guy is a journalist] alone by some local officials invite arrest. I have been arrested thrice this year [2011] and released without charges... “I am sometimes told not [to] leave my house. Some of my colleagues have had press cards withdrawn and torn at our watch which is unacceptable and I thought this is a practice being experienced by journalists living outside the national capital.”

However, [the most brazen assault of all was the one directed at Dr. Jok Madut Jok](#), a deputy minister in the government of South Sudan, on December 31st, 2011, in Wau.

“I was brutally attacked, my arms tight by several men, a blow to the side of my head with the butt of a gun and several punches straight onto both of my eyes; no questions asked, not even any accusations of wrongdoing. I was tortured properly while I had quickly shown the soldiers my identity card, demonstrating that I am a senior official in the national government, undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture, [but] the ID was thrown away and several men wrestled me to the ground.”

As if the beating was not enough, the officer in charge started touting [Dr. Jok Madut](#):

“As I was seated on the floor, being interrogated, several drunken soldiers, the ones “protecting” our leader, kept interrupting their officer with really unsoldierly behavior. And instead of the officer reprimanding them, he told me “you see, they may be drunk, but that is how we liberated this country.” There is that phrase, so commonly used as justification for misconduct. “We liberated it” is now thrown in your face left and right, even if it means taking the liberty to be drunk on the job, loot public property, claim entitlement for a job one is not qualified for, beat or even shoot to kill civilians over nonsense”

In a [YouTube video clip](#) in which Dr. John Garang, the late leader of the SPLM/A, was addressing his army officers in readiness for their transition from a rebel movement into a civilian government, he warned that “if the SPLM government will not provide basic services and security to the people under their care, then the people will throw them into the sea, and even if there is no sea around, they will definitely find one.” Mr. Biel Boutros reasons that the SPLM has already squandered its hard-earned legacy and popularity with the citizens of South Sudan. Still, he believes that there is no need for an [Arab-Spring-style revolution](#) in the Republic of South Sudan given the lingering memories of the last protracted civil war between the SPLM/A and the government of the Sudan that [resulted in the independence of South Sudan](#).

But as the latest humiliating abduction and flagrant torturing of Deng Athuai Mawiir indicates, [South Sudan has got a long way to go](#) before the fourth arm of the government—the Media, could claim its rightful place in Juba. But if [past trends are anything to go by](#), then the wanton assault on the Chairperson of the South Sudan Civil Society Alliance may not be the last one any time soon. The very media and penmanship that dutifully served the SPLM/A during the dark days of the long civil war has now become so reviled that the new government of the Republic of South Sudan seems to have [declared a total war on it](#).

Yet, if the SPLM/A was fighting for a free, democratic nation in which freedom of expression and the media is guaranteed, protected and promoted, and is still presently advocating for the same goal as it is enshrined in the South Sudan interim constitution, then [the government of the Republic of South Sudan must pass the three outstanding media bills without further delay](#). The Republic of South Sudan has enough of its internal and external conundrums to wrestle with; it does not have the luxury to afford a new war front. Freedom of the Press and freedom of speech are few constitutional rights which, if permitted to flourish, could spark a national dialogue on the most pressing issues such as corruption and bad governance in South Sudan. Attacking journalists and arresting people without charges indicate that the South Sudan judicial system is too dysfunctional to prosecute criminals.

The panacea, in the opinion of Biel Boutros, is to immediately pass the three outstanding media bills so as to fight and deter criminal activities because journalists will cover them. As a matter of fact, the government should rather perceive journalists as ‘secret investigators’ who are willing to expose illegal acts. Many South Sudanese writers, human rights activists and journalists have had the misfortune of crossing paths with the authorities. But this is only the tip of the iceberg because [many cases against low-profile media personnel who bear constant harassments and intimidations](#) from the law enforcement agents and grumpy politicians go unreported.

If this behavior doesn’t change anytime soon, one is likely to see South Sudan being labeled as one of the “[brutal regime](#)” because of how the security forces and the SPLA soldiers harass journalists and mistreat civilians. I believe that labeling by the International Community will undoubtedly tarnish the image of the young nation at a time when we all need to prove to the whole world that we are not a [pre-failed state that has become a global child problem](#).

PaanLuel Wël (paanluel2011@gmail.com) is the Managing Editor of PaanLuel Wël: South Sudanese Bloggers. He can be reached through his Facebook page, Twitter account or on the blog: <http://paanluelwel2011.wordpress.com/>