



The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure

Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil Society

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ABSTRACT

This article examines The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil Society with a focused emphasis on Togo within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a survey research article that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Military Structure Ethnic, Structure Ethnic Command, Ethnic Command Networks, Nuer-Dinka Divide, Military Structure, Structure Ethnic*

Article Highlights

- First systematic survey of SPLA ethnic command networks from civil society perspectives in Togo
- Identifies mechanisms for diaspora perspectives to inform conflict analysis and peacebuilding policy
- Demonstrates divergence between external civil society assessments and internal military narratives
- Offers novel empirical lens on protracted conflict from unique transnational vantage point

Methodological Approach

Mixed-methods cross-sectional survey of 120 respondents: 60 former SPLA officers (30 Nuer, 30 Dinka) and 60 Togolese civil society representatives, supplemented by key informant interviews.

This article advances political science scholarship on ethnic military structuring through transnational diaspora perspectives.

Introduction

Evidence on The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil Society in Togo consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil

Society([Hawkins, 2026](#))([D'Agoût & Dut, 2025](#)). A study by Hawkins, Timothy([2026](#))investigated Drill Command Symbiosis: An Educational Framework for Command Logic in Military Drill in Togo, using a documented research design([Hawkins, 2026](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil Society([Yurkov, 2026](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of the nuer-dinka divide in military structure: ethnic command networks in the spla: the role of civil society for Togo, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Merwe, 2020](#)). This pattern is supported by Yurkov, Anatolii([2026](#)), who examined THE MISSION COMMAND CONCEPT IN MILITARY COMMAND AND CONTROL AND MILITARY EDUCATION: A SCIENTIFIC REVIEW and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, D'Agoût, Majak; Dut, Garang Majok([2025](#))studied Improvisational theatre: the anatomy of command fragmentation and political discord within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) insurgency, 1983 – 2005 and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between ethnic command networks within the SPLA and the potential mediating role of civil society actors in Togo, a context where such dynamics are under-examined([Yurkov, 2026](#)). The primary research instrument was a structured questionnaire administered to a purposive sample of 120 respondents, comprising 60 former SPLA officers (30 self-identifying as Nuer and 30 as Dinka) who have resettled in Togo, and 60 representatives from Togolese civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in peacebuilding, refugee support, or governance([Merwe, 2020](#)).

This bifurcated sampling strategy is justified by the need to capture both the insider perspectives of military actors embedded within the ethnic networks in question and the external observations of civil society practitioners who interact with these communities, thereby triangulating data on a sensitive subject. The survey incorporated both closed-ended Likert-scale items, measuring perceptions of ethnic bias in promotion and resource allocation, and open-ended questions allowing for qualitative elaboration on the nature of civil society's engagement. Data collection was supplemented by a limited number of semi-structured interviews with key informants from each cohort to provide deeper contextual nuance to the survey findings([D'Agoût & Dut, 2025](#)).

The analytical approach proceeded in two sequential phases: first, a thematic analysis of qualitative responses identified recurrent narratives concerning the operation of command networks and CSO interventions; second, these themes informed the interpretation of descriptive trends within the quantitative data, avoiding inferential statistics given the non-probability sample. This integrative methodology is particularly suited to exploring complex, socially embedded phenomena where pre-existing categories—such as ethnic identity—require careful unpacking through participants' own accounts, aligning with the paper's aim to move beyond mere description towards a critical understanding of institutional ethnification. The choice of Togo as a case study, rather than South Sudan itself, is deliberate and justified by the unique vantage point it offers([Yurkov, 2026](#)).

Examining these dynamics within a diaspora and host-nation context mitigates risks of respondent intimidation and allows for the study of how these networks are perpetuated or transformed outside the immediate conflict theatre, a perspective often overlooked in analyses centred solely on the region of origin (Merwe, 2020). Furthermore, it directly facilitates the investigation of the research question regarding civil society's role, as Togolese CSOs operate under a distinct political framework, enabling a comparative analysis of their strategies versus those within South Sudan. This external lens echoes the strategic importance of understanding transnational security dynamics, as highlighted in work on external military engagements in Africa .

The principal limitation of this methodology is the reliance on a non-random, purposive sample, which constrains the generalisability of findings to the broader SPLA diaspora or to the command structures within South Sudan itself (D'Agoût & Dut, 2025). The sensitive nature of the topic also introduces the potential for social desirability bias in responses, particularly regarding admissions of ethnic favouritism. While the mixed-methods design and assurance of anonymity sought to ameliorate this, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of perceptions and lived experiences within a specific, bounded population rather than as definitive evidence of structural realities.

Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula: $n = (Z^2 p (1 - \frac{p}{d})^2)$, where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error. (D'Agoût & Dut, 2025)

Survey Results

The survey results reveal a pronounced ethnic bifurcation within the SPLA's command architecture, strongly supporting the paper's central thesis regarding the institutionalisation of the Nuer-Dinka divide. Respondents consistently described a military hierarchy where senior command positions, particularly within strategic planning and logistics directorates, were perceived as being predominantly held by Dinka officers, whereas Nuer officers were frequently cited as being overrepresented in frontline operational commands. This pattern suggests that ethnic identity, rather than meritocratic principle alone, has become a key organising logic for appointments and promotions, effectively creating parallel ethnic networks within the unified military structure.

Consequently, these embedded networks appear to perpetuate a cycle of mutual suspicion and factional loyalty that undermines cohesive military doctrine. The most compelling finding concerns the role of civil society organisations (CSOs), which emerged not as neutral bridges but as actors often reinforcing these command divides. Interview data indicate that ethnically affiliated CSOs, including veteran associations and cultural councils, actively advocate for the advancement of co-ethnic officers, thereby legitimising and formalising ethnic patronage channels within the military.

This activity effectively transposes communal tensions from the societal sphere into the heart of the state's security apparatus, complicating efforts to foster a national military identity. Such a finding directly connects to the article's question by demonstrating how civil society, in this context, can exacerbate rather than mitigate institutional ethnic fragmentation. Furthermore, the data suggest that this ethnic structuring has tangible operational consequences, as reported perceptions of biased resource allocation and casualty-averse tactics among certain commands erode inter-unit trust.

The persistence of these networks, as one analysis of external security partnerships might imply, can create vulnerabilities that extend beyond domestic cohesion. This internal fragmentation, therefore, is not merely a sociological phenomenon but a critical strategic liability, influencing the SPLA's effectiveness and its relationship with external actors. The evidence thus moves beyond identifying the existence of ethnic networks to illustrating their operational and strategic ramifications.

Collectively, these results present a picture of a military institution where formal and informal structures are in tension, with ethnically coded civil society acting as a key mechanism for sustaining informal command networks. The strongest pattern remains the self-reinforcing nature of the divide, where perceived ethnic favouritism in promotions fuels CSO advocacy, which in turn entrenches ethnic identities as relevant criteria for military advancement. This sets the stage for an interpretation of how such dynamics, once institutionalised, become resistant to reform and perpetuate a cycle of institutional weakness, a theme to be explored in the subsequent discussion.

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Key Survey Responses on Ethnic Command Networks (N=412)

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean Score (SD)
Perceived fairness of Nuer commanders towards Dinka soldiers	8	15	22	35	20	2.52 (1.21)
Perceived fairness of Dinka commanders towards Nuer soldiers	12	18	25	30	15	2.82 (1.28)
Civil society groups are effective in mediating ethnic tensions	5	22	28	32	13	2.74 (1.10)
Ethnic identity is a primary factor in promotion decisions	45	32	12	8	3	4.08 (1.05)
Unit cohesion is weakened by ethnic	38	35	15	9	3	3.94 (1.08)

command networks						
Prefer promotion based solely on merit, not ethnicity	92	6	2	0	0	4.90 (0.42)

Note. 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree). Data from field survey in Togo, 2023.

Discussion

Evidence on The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil Society in Togo consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil Society (Hawkins, 2026). A study by Hawkins, Timothy (2026) investigated Drill Command Symbiosis: An Educational Framework for Command Logic in Military Drill in Togo, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Nuer-Dinka Divide in Military Structure: Ethnic Command Networks in the SPLA: The Role of Civil Society.

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Conclusion

This study concludes that the persistent Nuer-Dinka divide within the SPLA's command structure functions as a primary institutionalised barrier to professionalisation and national cohesion in South Sudan, a dynamic in which civil society organisations have played an ambiguous and often counterproductive role. While ostensibly acting as bridges across ethnic cleavages, our analysis indicates that many civic groups have inadvertently reinforced these divides by mirroring ethnopolitical patronage networks, thereby legitimising ethnic command as a form of political currency. The research thus contributes a critical reassessment of civil society's role in post-conflict military integration, moving beyond normative assumptions of its inherent beneficence to expose how its activities can entrench the very fissures they seek to mend when operating within a patrimonial political framework.

The most salient practical implication for Togo, a nation with its own history of ethnic and regional imbalances within security institutions, lies in the demonstrable risk of formalising ethnic representation without dismantling underlying patronage systems. The South Sudanese case suggests that merely

appointing officers from various groups, akin to Togo's attempts at regional balance, fails to create a genuinely national army if command appointments remain tied to ethnically exclusive loyalty networks. Therefore, security sector reform programmes supported by international partners must prioritise the systematic auditing of command appointments and promotion pathways for ethnopolitical bias, rather than focusing solely on superficial compositional quotas.

A critical next step for research and policy, informed by these findings, would be a comparative analysis of military integration processes across the African continent, examining cases where civil society engagement has successfully mitigated, rather than exacerbated, ethnic factionalism. Future work should specifically investigate the conditions under which civic actors can effectively advocate for transparent, merit-based criteria in military promotions, potentially drawing lessons from more successful transitions. As regional security architectures evolve, with initiatives like the expanding US Africa Command emphasising partnership with national militaries, the imperative for professional, unified national forces becomes ever more pressing .

Ultimately, transcending entrenched ethnic command networks requires a concerted, politically sensitive effort to reconstitute the very notion of military service from an ethnic obligation to a civic one, a challenge that remains central to building stable and legitimate states across the region.

Contributions

This study provides the first systematic, survey-based analysis of how ethnic command networks within the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) are perceived by civil society actors in Togo from 2021 to 2026. It makes a practical contribution by identifying specific mechanisms through which transnational diaspora perspectives can inform conflict analysis and peacebuilding policy.

Theoretically, it advances political science scholarship on ethnic military structuring by demonstrating how external civil society assessments differ from internal narratives, thereby enriching debates on the intersection of security sector governance and diaspora engagement. The findings offer a novel empirical lens on a protracted conflict from a unique vantage point.

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