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Focus

WHERE NEXT FOR
SOUTH SUDAN
AND MACHAR?

By Waakhe Simon WUDU

War-torn South Sudan's slide into chaos resumed last month with fresh fighting in the capital Juba that forced rebel leader turned vice president and peace deal signatory Riek Machar to flee. With the spike in clashes came a surge of abuse of civilians by armed men including rape, murder and looting. A year-old peace deal was only partly implemented and, as July's battles showed, was insufficient to stop the war-yet regional and foreign powers cling to it as the country's only hope. So where next for hopes of peace in South Sudan and for rebel leader Machar?

Is there still a peace agreement in South Sudan?

The deal, signed in August last year by rebel leader Machar and President Salva Kiir, hangs in the balance. Machar has fled the country and been replaced as vice president by Taban Deng Gai, who leads a Juba-based faction of the opposition SPLM/A-IO. Deng's appointment has yet to be fully accepted by either Machar loyalists or the international community that forced through the peace deal. During a visit to Kenya this month, US Secretary of State John Kerry hinted at US acceptance of the new reality when he described Machar's ouster as a "replacement of personnel" that was legal under the agreement.

Where is rebel leader Riek Machar?

Machar fled Juba on foot after fighting in the city ended on July 11. He resurfaced in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo on Aug 18 and then flew to the Sudanese capital Khartoum for unspecified medical treatment. Aides say Machar is eager to reassert himself politically as soon as he is fit and well by visiting regional countries that are members of the IGAD bloc (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), which has led successive rounds of peace talks.

Who backs Machar and who is against him?

Machar left a sharply divided (and, in Juba, militarily defeated) former rebel movement in his wake when he fled. Deng enjoys the backing of Kiir but field commanders, armed forces and SPLM/A-IO leaders outside Juba continue to back Machar - for now. "Machar is still an influential leader as long as he is alive," said James Okuk, a political scientist at Juba University. Regional bloc IGAD has said that Deng should step aside when Machar returns, but the longer Machar is absent the stronger Deng's claim becomes and he may yet consolidate his position among the former rebels too. One way to achieve this, analysts say, would be for Deng and Kiir to move ahead with integrating rebel forces into the national army, effectively disarming Machar while implementing a key provision of the peace accords.

Can Machar stage a comeback?

Machar loyalists are being rooted out of South Sudan's parliament and cabinet and being replaced with Deng's allies, weakening Machar's influence. Five out of 10 SPLM-IO ministers have been replaced along with 25 out of 50 MPs. Meanwhile Deng has quickly taken up the functions of the vice presidency, undertaking official visits to both Kenya and Sudan in recent weeks. Machar's future appears to rest in foreign hands and is largely dependent on whether the international community is willing to move ahead on a peace agreement without him.

Will the promised UN 'protection force' be deployed?

On August 12 the UN Security Council approved the deployment of a so-called "protection force" in South Sudan to bolster the much-criticized peacekeeping operation there and enable the implementation of the peace agreement. Machar has said he will not return to Juba until a "neutral force" is in place and his safety guaranteed, but Kiir's government has resisted the UN plan, insisting it is a challenge to South Sudan's sovereignty and that further negotiations over the force's mandate are needed. While South Sudan has stopped short of refusing to accept more peacekeepers, the government has yet to accept them either, and it is impossible to imagine UN soldiers being deployed against the will of the government. — AFP

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WHY AN EMBLEMATIC CITY HAS TURNED TO TRUMP

By Timothy Aeppl

One night a month, retired auto workers shuffle into a former elementary school classroom here to discuss their legal fight against the company that cancelled their health care benefits seven years ago. But the conversation often turns quickly to presidential politics. "It can get pretty heated," says Gerald Poor, the group's 77-year-old president, of their political discussions. "I call it to order if it gets out of hand."

Their anger is understandable. The group is a remnant of a once-powerful United Auto Workers union local, which at its peak in the 1960s represented over 5,000 workers who made transmissions in Muncie for BorgWarner Inc, the global auto parts maker. An American flag drapes the wall at one end of the room, portraits of former labor bosses line the other, salvaged from a union hall that had its own baseball field.

For this group of mostly white, working-class men, the last two decades have brought much loss. In this election - with the victory of the populist Donald Trump as the Republican Party nominee and the strong run by the populist Bernie Sanders for the Democratic Party crown - many say they feel they're finally being heard again. Working-class white men were once a force to be reckoned with in American politics. Many here speak wistfully of how John F. Kennedy stopped at BorgWarner to talk to workers when he campaigned in 1960. For these men, this year's election is a rare taste of the clout they once took for granted.

In the primary, Trump received the most votes of any candidate in either party in Delaware County, which encompasses Muncie. Just over 52 percent of Republican voters went for Trump. Democrats picked Sanders over Hillary Clinton by an even wider margin. "Candidates in the past made a lot of promises to the working class in this country and failed to follow through with it," says 66-year-old Bruce Reynolds, who followed his father and grandfather into a career at BorgWarner. Gazing through the rusted chain link fence that encircles the sprawling, abandoned factory, where he notes with precision that he worked for "32 and a half years," he says he's still skeptical of both sides' promises.

The White Slide

Neither Trump nor Clinton was his first choice. Reynolds and his wife voted for Sanders in the primary, he says. Among oth-

er things, they couldn't support Clinton: She's the wife of former President Bill Clinton, who signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, which many here blame for Muncie's economic decline. They were uneasy with the often fiery rhetoric of Trump, the other side's top candidate. Yet both plan to vote for Trump in November, and Reynolds says they've grown comfortable with the choice. "I know, it sounds like we're confused," he says.

But they're not. Like many Trump supporters, he glides over the unappealing aspects of the candidate's message to lock onto those that he likes. For Reynolds, it's the hope of bringing back jobs for his children, some of whom still struggle to find decent work. Trump's gloomy world view is often dismissed as hyperbole, such as when he described crime and collapsed economies in America's cities at the Republican National Convention. But for someone in Muncie, that's not far off reality.

An analysis by Reuters found Delaware County is an extreme example of the declining fortunes of America's white working-class men. In 2000, white men with less than a college degree accounted for about three-quarters of all white men living in the county. By 2014, their proportion had dropped by about 5 percentage points, according to the US Census Bureau. But while this group's share of the population held relatively steady, the earnings of white men with full-time jobs had fallen dramatically.

In 2000, 47 percent of white men working full time were in the bottom third of earners, with incomes of \$50,000 or less, based on 2015 dollars. By 2014, 60 percent of them were in the bottom third. Meanwhile, the percentage of white men in full-time jobs making between \$50,000 and \$100,000 dropped from 43 percent to 32 percent. And the percentage in the ranks of earners above \$100,000 slipped from 11 percent to 8 percent. In essence, white men in Muncie have slid down from every rung of the economic ladder. They have clustered at the bottom, poorer and more isolated than ever before, even as the overall US economy has grown and globalized.

Muncie as 'Middletown'

The same trend is visible in faded industrial pockets from New Jersey and upstate New York to Alabama and Kentucky. According to the data, in about 1,800 counties across the United States - nearly 60 percent of those where data is available - the share of white

men in the lowest group of earners has grown over this period. The trend is particularly pronounced in the Rust Belt states of Michigan, Ohio and Indiana.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business, studies how people adopt their political beliefs. "Trump is the first candidate to speak to-and speak for-working-class white men in a long time," Haidt says. That separates him from the last two Republican nominees. Mitt Romney, who lost in 2012, didn't do that, "and John McCain didn't particularly reach out to that constituency" in 2008. As for Trump's extreme positions and outright falsehoods, Haidt notes, "If your hero says things that are untrue, you'll cut him slack."

Muncie was once the epitome of America's muscular manufacturing economy. After natural gas was discovered here late in the 19th century, the city attracted dozens of energy-intensive glass manufacturers, most notably Ball Corp, which built sprawling factories that churned out millions of mason jars. The auto industry followed, and Muncie became a hub for transmission making. The term "Muncie transmission" is still used by hot rod enthusiasts when talking about gearboxes produced here by General Motors Corp in the 1960s. One particularly powerful version is the "rock crusher," used in Corvettes and other muscle cars.

BorgWarner, based in Auburn Hills, Michigan, has even deeper roots in Muncie than GM. Warner Gear was founded here in 1901 and merged with other businesses to create what became BorgWarner in the late 1920s. Many former workers here still call it Warner Gear. In the 1920s, a husband-and-wife team of sociologists picked the city to study the values in a typical American community. They called it "Middletown," to conceal the identity of a place they felt was emblematic of the country as a whole. Muncie residents soon figured out it was all about them.

The Center for Middletown Studies at Ball State University has continued the work, compiling oral histories and, in recent years, focused on the devastation of deindustrialization. James Connolly, a history professor who runs the center, says that more than anything else, Muncie's working-class white men feel a loss of power. When the big factories were humming, the unions were an unstoppable force - not just for getting good paychecks and lush benefits, but a voice in almost everything else.

Union Power

To illustrate this power, he cites a locally famous episode from the 1960s, when waitresses at a big downtown hotel went on strike for higher wages. "A group of police got rough and tried to break up the pickets," says Connolly. A local union leader - who had nothing to do with the waitresses, other than knowing about them through community connections - called the then-mayor, who was visiting Washington, and "ordered him home" to intervene. The mayor returned and the police backed off.

"The strikers weren't union members-but there was a system of connections that gave them a sense of control," says Connolly. With the decline of the unions, working-class people "feel like they've been robbed of that voice." And yet unions, which were unable to prevent the factory closures that ravaged the city, are often viewed just as suspiciously here as most national politicians are. That tension is visible at the old school where the BorgWarner retirees meet.

The Muncie Delaware County Senior Center was created to give retirees from the big factories - particularly men - a place to go for companionship and activities. One recent day, the room the BorgWarner retirees use was filled with seniors learning line dancing. "Some people don't like the photos" of the union leaders, says Jim Shields, a janitor, motioning toward the 10 portraits that adorn the front of the room. They feel the images carry an implicitly political, pro-union message. So, there was a fuss the last time the building was used as a polling station, he said. "We had complaints." Now, when the BorgWarner retiree group isn't meeting, Shields carefully drapes a long bolt of fabric over the pictures to conceal them.

Michael Hicks, a Ball State economist who studies manufacturing, says a mix of exasperation with unions and the political elite created the perfect opening for Trump. "It's always easier to blame a larger force for your problems, whether that's Mexicans or greedy factory owners," he says. "But these people aren't stupid. They know the jobs aren't coming back." The bigger concern for many of them, he says, is what will happen to their children. The Reynolds family is a good example. Bruce Reynolds's oldest son, Bruce Jr, is a Baptist pastor and is supporting Trump, albeit reluctantly. "I don't think any of them can fix it," Bruce Jr says of the fallout he sees from economic hardship in his congregation, from growing drug addiction to broken families. — Reuters

UZBEKISTAN IN UNCERTAINTY WITH KARIMOV ILL

By Max Delany

Ex-Soviet nation Uzbekistan has plunged into uncharted territory after strongman leader Islam Karimov, who has dominated the country for over 25 years, was rushed into intensive care after a brain hemorrhage. While conflicting rumors of Karimov's condition buzz through the Central Asian nation, one thing is sure - the strategic country is facing a moment of uncertainty unparalleled in its post-Soviet history. "The developments are unprecedented," Steve Swerdlow, Central Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch, told AFP. "The entire state has been Islam Karimov, Islam Karimov has been the state for over quarter of a century ruling with an iron fist."

Former Soviet apparatchik Karimov, 78, whose brutal crackdown on dissent has been widely criticized by rights groups, has been at the helm of the strategic country bordering Afghanistan from since before it gained independence from Moscow in 1991. His younger

daughter Lola Karimova-Tillyaeva announced on social media Monday that he was in a "stable" condition in hospital after suffering a cerebral hemorrhage over the weekend. Since then the authorities in the tightly-controlled state have released no further official statement on his health.

'No One Knows'

While there has been no confirmation of Karimov's latest condition and he could in theory stage a recovery, the gravity of his illness has left many in the country now facing up to the prospect of life without the only ruler they have ever known. "Uzbeks have known for a long time that that moment would arrive, so no one would be surprised, but no one knows what will happen next," said Scott Radnitz, an associate professor at the University of Washington told AFP.

Despite being dogged by persistent health rumors, Karimov lacks a clear successor after being re-elected to a fifth term in 2015 with more than 90 percent of the vote.

The country has never held an election judged free and fair by international monitors. "There are two questions now: First, is there a plan for succession we don't know about? Second, even if there is, will the principals stick to it?" Radnitz said.

In theory the head of the senate should step in if Karimov dies or is incapable of ruling, but analysts dismissed him as a water-carrier. Instead those tipped to take over more long term in the case of Karimov's long illness or death include Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov, Kamoliddin Rabbimov, an independent Uzbek political analyst based in France, told AFP. "I think in the corridors of power they have already started fighting."

Rabbimov said, while predicting the elite will be keen to ensure the transition is "more or less stable." "On the one hand the political elite is fighting each other and regrouping but on the other, they understand they need to keep control of the country. They have

gained massive wealth under Karimov." Critics accuse Karimov of ruthlessly eviscerating all opposition in the cotton-rich country - most prominently with the alleged massacre of hundreds of protesters in the city of Andijan in 2005.

But the veteran operator has managed to play Russia, the West and China off against each other to keep his regime from total isolation. Swerdlow from Human Rights Watch said that while "certainly we could get more of the same or we could get even worse" in terms of human rights from any new leadership, this was a moment for "maximum leverage" from the West for Uzbekistan to clean up its act. "The fear is that in order to avoid any future leader of Uzbekistan running closely into the embrace of the Kremlin they'll need to reserve their criticism," Swerdlow said. "The truth is if Western diplomats are looking at this objectively is that Uzbekistan has always charted a course away or independent of Moscow and will likely continue to do so." — AFP