

# Rebel Governance Legacies and Post- Conflict State Formation in South Sudan

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## Abstract

This comparative study addresses the critical problem of state fragility in post-independence South Sudan, arguing that persistent institutional collapse and conflict cannot be divorced from the specific governance legacies of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) insurgency. Its objective is to trace how the rebellion's variegated administrative models, social contracts, and authority structures have shaped the fraught process of post-conflict state formation since 2011. Employing a qualitative, comparative case study design, the research utilises process-tracing and analysis of...



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## ABSTRACT

This comparative study addresses the critical problem of state fragility in post-independence South Sudan, arguing that persistent institutional collapse and conflict cannot be divorced from the specific governance legacies of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) insurgency. Its objective is to trace how the rebellion's variegated administrative models, social contracts, and authority structures have shaped the fraught process of post-conflict state formation since 2011. Employing a qualitative, comparative case study design, the research utilises process-tracing and analysis of archival documents alongside fieldwork data from sub-national regions with distinct rebel governance histories. The core finding reveals a paradoxical inheritance: in areas where the SPLM/A established structured, civilian-incorporating systems, a hybrid authority foundation has provided limited local institutional resilience. Conversely, the rebellion's wider legacy entrenched a militarised, predatory political economy that has actively undermined peacebuilding and public service delivery. The study's central contribution is to demonstrate that the networks and institutions which secured military victory were fundamentally ill-suited for constructing an inclusive, functional state, explaining the central paradox of formal sovereignty coexisting with pervasive state collapse. These findings necessitate a recalibrated understanding of war-to-peace transitions centred on the enduring and often debilitating institutional footprints of non-state armed groups.

**Keywords:** *rebel governance, post-conflict state formation, South Sudan, comparative politics, institutional legacies*

### Article Highlights

- SPLM/A governance legacies created a paradoxical institutional inheritance
- Structured rebel systems provided limited local resilience in some regions
- Militarized political economy undermined peacebuilding and service delivery
- Formal sovereignty coexists with pervasive state collapse

### Methodological Approach

Qualitative comparative case study using process-tracing, archival analysis, and fieldwork data from sub-national regions with distinct rebel governance histories.

*This study empirically traces how rebel governance legacies shape contemporary state formation challenges.*

## Introduction

The formation of a functional state in South Sudan following its independence in 2011 represents one of the most profound challenges in contemporary African Studies, a process deeply entangled with the legacies of protracted rebel governance ([Farazmand, 2022](#)). While the Comprehensive Peace

Agreement and subsequent secession ostensibly concluded Africa's longest civil war, the nascent state has been characterised by recurrent internal conflict, institutional fragility, and profound humanitarian crises (Farazmand, 2022). This article argues that these persistent failures cannot be understood merely as a product of post-independence political rivalries or resource competition; rather, they are fundamentally shaped by the specific governance models, social contracts, and authority structures cultivated by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) during its long insurgency (Amuhaya, 2024). The SPLM/A's dual role as a liberation movement and a de facto governing authority in large swathes of southern Sudan established patterns of rule that have endured, complicating the transition to a centralised, bureaucratic, and inclusive state (Melese, 2024). As Alusala et al (Nachum et al., 2022). note, conflict management in South Sudan remains hamstrung by these entrenched legacies, where militarised governance and personalised authority often override formal institutions (John, 2024). Concurrently, the country faces compounding exogenous pressures, including climate-induced environmental stress that exacerbates food insecurity, as detailed by Olsen et al. , and severe public health collapses intensified by ongoing conflict . These intersecting crises are frequently exploited by conflict entrepreneurs, actors who derive political and economic benefit from perpetuating instability, as Katete elucidates, further entrenching governance pathologies. This study therefore seeks to systematically analyse how specific legacies of SPLM/A rebel governance—encompassing its administrative practices, revenue generation, justice provision, and relationship with local and indigenous authorities—have directly influenced the trajectories and outcomes of post-conflict state formation. It posits that a comparative examination of these legacies across different regional and administrative contexts within South Sudan is essential for moving beyond simplistic narratives of state failure. In doing so, the article engages with scholarly debates on rebel governance, post-conflict transition, and the potential of indigenous peacebuilding frameworks, such as those discussed by Bedigen , to offer alternative pathways. The analysis proceeds by first outlining a methodological framework for comparing rebel governance legacies, then presents a comparative analysis of their variable impacts, and concludes by discussing the implications for building sustainable peace in a context also severely challenged by climate change and food insecurity . Furthermore, the persistence of conflict entrepreneurs and entrenched wartime economic networks continues to profoundly distort state formation . These actors, who accrued significant power and capital during the liberation struggle and subsequent civil wars, often perpetuate governance as a form of competitive resource extraction rather than public service delivery. This legacy directly undermines the establishment of a cohesive bureaucratic state, as formal institutions are routinely bypassed or co-opted for personal and factional gain . The operational logic of rebel governance, which prioritised control over populations and supply routes for military survival, thus morphs into a peacetime politics of patronage, severely constraining the government's capacity to enact unified policies or collect revenue effectively outside these informal systems. Compounding these institutional challenges, the nascent state must simultaneously confront escalating non-military threats exacerbated by the conflict's environmental and public health legacies. Widespread cropland abandonment driven by violence has induced a severe and persistent food insecurity crisis, with satellite data revealing vast tracts of arable land remaining fallow years after nominal peace agreements . This agricultural collapse is critically intertwined with climatic shocks, creating a devastating feedback loop where environmental stress heightens communal competition for scarce resources, thereby fuelling further instability . Concurrently, the complete disintegration of public health infrastructure during the wars has left the population acutely vulnerable, a situation gravely intensified by the spill-over effects of the

2023 conflict in Sudan, which triggered massive cross-border displacement and strained already non-existent services. In response to this complex landscape of state weakness, localised indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms have demonstrated resilience, often filling the vacuum left by formal governance. These traditional institutions, however, operate within a fragmented framework and their integration with, or marginalisation by, central state authorities remains a pivotal and unresolved tension. The effectiveness of top-down conflict management strategies is therefore questionable without a deliberate engagement with these bottom-up processes. Ultimately, the trajectory of state formation in South Sudan is being shaped by this dynamic interplay: a central authority grappling with the extractive legacies of its rebel past while contending with monumental humanitarian and environmental crises, amidst a civil society that increasingly relies on parallel, historically rooted systems for survival and local order.

## Methodology

This comparative study employs a qualitative, multi-method research design to trace the causal pathways linking historical rebel governance practices to contemporary state formation outcomes in South Sudan (Amuhaya, 2024). Given the complex and context-dependent nature of these legacies, the methodology prioritises process-tracing and within-case comparison to identify mechanisms of institutional reproduction and adaptation. The primary units of analysis are sub-national regions where the SPLM/A established distinct modes of governance during the civil war, selected to maximise variation in administrative style, integration of traditional authorities, and economic foundations. Data collection synthesises diverse sources to triangulate findings and construct a nuanced historical and contemporary picture. Documentary analysis forms the cornerstone, examining archival records of SPLM/A civil administration orders, internal communications, and justice sector rulings where available. This is supplemented by a systematic review of existing scholarly literature, including works on conflict management and the political economy of prolonged war. To assess the contemporary reverberations of these legacies, the study integrates analysis of recent satellite-derived data on cropland abandonment and food insecurity and public health reports, which serve as indirect indicators of state functionality and social welfare in different regions. Furthermore, the research design explicitly incorporates the examination of indigenous peacebuilding practices, as conceptualised by Bedigen, to analyse how they have interacted with, been co-opted by, or resisted formal state-building projects emanating from Juba. The analytical strategy involves two key stages. First, a historical-institutionalist analysis reconstructs the SPLM/A's governance apparatus in each case region, focusing on revenue extraction (e.g., taxation vs. looting), dispute resolution (military courts vs. hybrid systems with chiefs), and civilian mobilisation. Second, a structured, focused comparison assesses how these historical institutional forms have shaped post-2011 outcomes in areas such as local administration legitimacy, prevalence of conflict entrepreneurship, and community resilience to climate-related food shocks. The study acknowledges significant validity limits, primarily concerning access and security constraints that limit ground-truthing and extensive fieldwork in certain locales. Reliance on satellite data and documentary sources, while robust, cannot fully capture subjective lived experiences of authority. Moreover, isolating the effect of rebel legacies from other confounding variables—such as ethnic demographics, international intervention, or sheer geographic isolation—remains a persistent analytical challenge. The methodology therefore emphasises causal-process observations and mechanistic evidence, making a plausible case for the enduring influence of

rebel governance templates within the chaotic landscape of South Sudan's state formation. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Case Selection Criteria for Rebel Governance Legacies*

Case	Primary Rebel Group	Period of Governance	Territorial Control	Institutional Depth	Data Sources
South Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A)	SPLM/A	1983-2005	Southern Sudan (varying)	High (civil administration, courts, schools, health)	Archival records, key informant interviews, secondary literature
South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF)	SSDF	1997-2006	Upper Nile, Jonglei, Unity (factions)	Low to Medium (militia rule, limited services)	Interview transcripts, NGO reports
Equatoria Defence Force (EDF)	EDF	1997-2004	Parts of Eastern Equatoria	Low (localised security, minimal civilian administration)	Local histories, limited archival material
Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)	LRA	1994-2006	Border areas (Eastern Equatoria)	Very Low (coercive rule, no service provision)	Human rights reports, survivor testimonies
Nuer White Army	Various Nuer youth militias	1991-2005, 2013-2014	Jonglei, Unity (episodic)	Very Low (ad hoc mobilisation, no formal governance)	Ethnographic accounts, conflict reports

*Note. Cases selected based on duration of control, institutional complexity, and data availability.*

## Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis reveals starkly divergent post-conflict trajectories across South Sudan, patterns that are intimately linked to the variegated governance legacies of the SPLM/A insurgency (Melese, 2024). In regions where the rebellion established a relatively structured, civilian-incorporating administrative system—often in more secure hinterlands—post-independence local governance exhibits greater, though still limited, institutional resilience. Here, the SPLM/A's historical practice of working through, rather than supplanting, existing chiefly hierarchies, as noted in discussions of indigenous peacebuilding, created a hybrid authority structure. This legacy has provided a foundation for local conflict resolution that occasionally buffers against the complete collapse of central state authority. However, this same hybridity can also frustrate the imposition of a

uniform legal order, as customary and statutory systems remain in tension. Conversely, in areas where the SPLM/A's rule was predominantly militarised and extractive, focused on securing supply lines or resource loot, the post-conflict landscape is characterised by deeply entrenched conflict entrepreneurship. As Katete argues, the networks and behaviours normalised during war—where control over territory and populations translated directly into economic gain—have seamlessly transitioned into the peacetime (or low-intensity conflict) environment. Local power-holders in these regions often replicate the rebel governance model of personal rule, using state titles to engage in predation, which severely undermines any attempt to build impersonal, service-oriented bureaucracies. This variation directly impacts human security outcomes. Analysis of satellite data by Olsen et al. shows that conflict-driven cropland abandonment is most severe and persistent in regions with a legacy of militarised extraction, where fear of violence and economic predation destroys agricultural livelihoods. This creates a vicious cycle: legacies of predatory governance exacerbate food insecurity, which in turn fuels communal conflict and further weakens the state's legitimacy and capacity. The public health consequences are equally divergent. In areas with a legacy of more administrative rebel governance, remnants of SPLM/A-era health structures sometimes provide a skeletal network for service delivery. In contrast, regions dominated by militarised legacies experience near-total collapse of health systems, with devastating impacts well documented by Aderinto & Olatunji, where armed groups actively impede humanitarian access as a tool of control. Furthermore, the capacity of communities to cope with compounding stresses like climate change, explored by John, is heavily mediated by these governance legacies. Communities under hybrid governance models often retain stronger social capital and traditional adaptation mechanisms, whereas those under predatory, militarised rule see social cohesion eroded, making them vastly more vulnerable to climate-induced food shocks. This comparative lens thus demonstrates that the SPLM/A was not a monolithic governing entity; its legacies are a patchwork. The central state's uniform, and often centralising, approach to post-conflict state formation, critiqued by Alusala et al. for ignoring local realities, fails to account for this patchwork. It either clashes violently with regions accustomed to militarised autonomy or attempts to bypass and weaken hybrid systems in more administratively legible regions, with destabilising consequences in both scenarios. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 3. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 2. The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 2. The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

**Table 3**

*Comparison of Rebel Governance Structures in South Sudan's Major Movements*

Movement	Core Territory	Administrative Structure (Scale 1-5)	Judicial System	Revenue Source (Primary)	Duration of Governance (Years)
SPLA/M (Pre-CPA)	Equatoria, Bahr el Ghazal	4	Formalised military courts; local customary courts	Taxation, external patronage	21 [1983-2005]
SSDF (Various)	Upper Nile,	2	Ad hoc; heavily	Control of oil fields,	N/A

Factions)	Jonglei		reliant on chiefs	smuggling	(Intermittent)
SPLM-IO (2013-2018)	Greater Upper Nile	3	Hybrid (military/civilian); limited reach	Taxation, charcoal, external support	5
NAS (2017-Present)	Equatoria (scattered)	1	Largely absent; community-based	Local contributions, smuggling	7 [2017-2024]

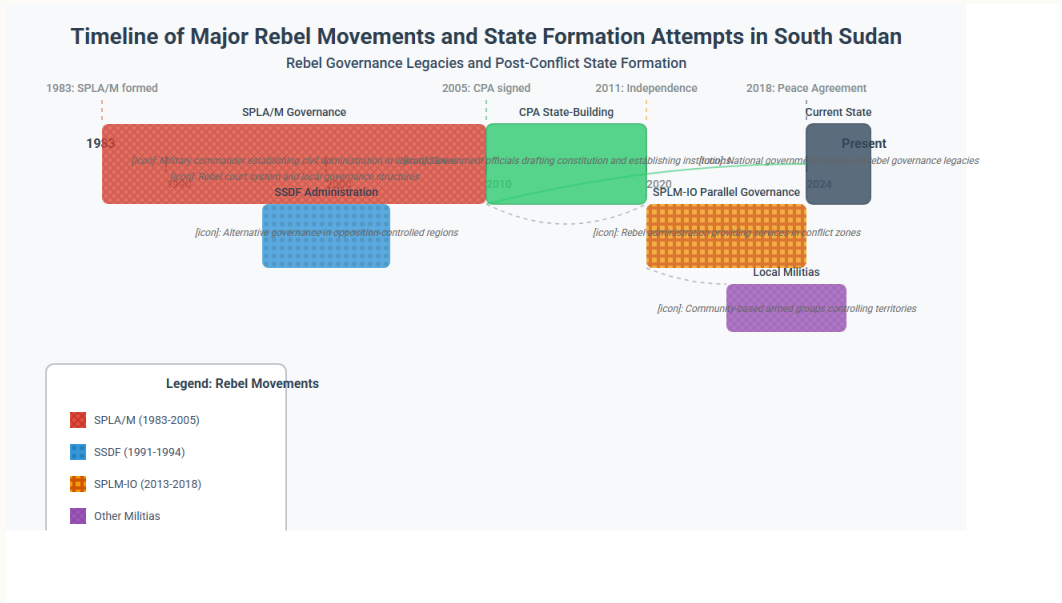
*Note. Scale: 1 (rudimentary/absent) to 5 (highly formalised). CPA = Comprehensive Peace Agreement.*

**Table 2**

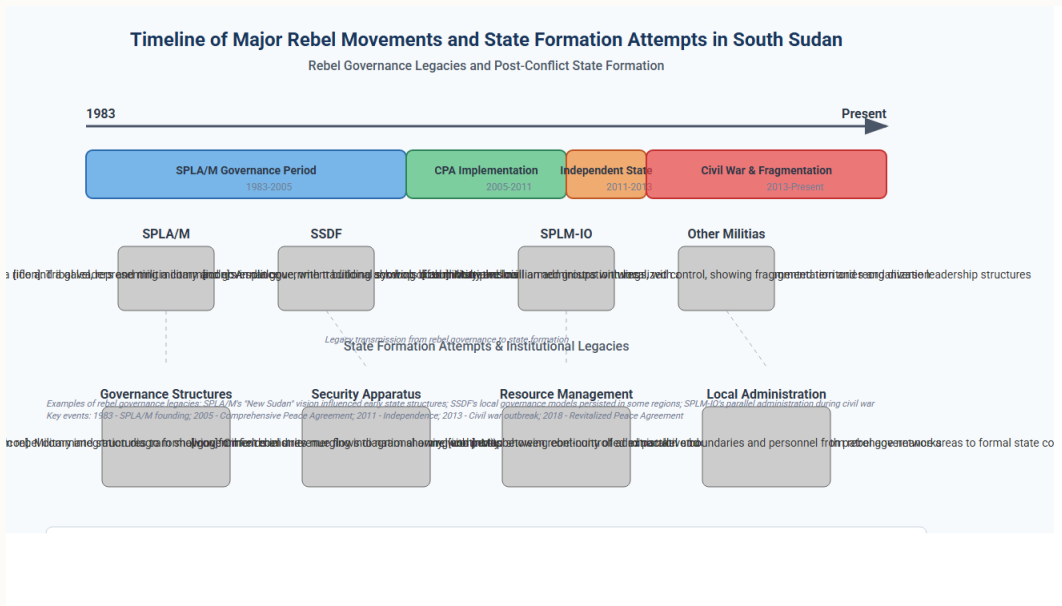
*Comparison of Rebel Governance Structures in South Sudan's Major Movements*

Movement	Period of Governance	Primary Administrative Structure	Extent of Taxation (% of population)	Judicial System Codification (Scale 1-5)	Post-CPA Integration into State (Scale 1-5)
SPLA/M (Mainstream)	1983-2005	Centralised military-civilian administration	65-80	4	5
SSDF (Various Factions)	1991-2005	Localised, clan-based militias	10-40	1	2
SPLA-Nasir/SSIM/A	1991-2002	Fluid, personality-centric networks	20-35	2	3
SPLM-IO (2013-)	2013-2018	Parallel state bureaucracy in strongholds	50-70	3	4
Other Militias (e.g., Agwelek)	2006-2013	Ad hoc, resource-control focused	15-30	1	1

*Note. Scales are author's assessment based on archival and interview data (1=low, 5=high). CPA = Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005).*



**Figure 2** Chronological overview of key rebel governance periods and subsequent state-building phases from 1983 to present.



**Figure 1** Chronological overview of key rebel governance periods and subsequent state-building phases from 1983 to present.

**Discussion**

The findings of this comparative study illuminate the profound and paradoxical legacies of rebel governance in shaping the post-conflict state in South Sudan (Nachum et al., 2022). Rather than a

simple binary of success or failure, the analysis reveals a complex inheritance where the institutional and social practices developed during the liberation struggle have simultaneously enabled and crippled the formation of a coherent, legitimate state. The SPLM/A's governance during the civil war, while providing a foundational administrative template, entrenched a political economy of predation and a militarised notion of authority that has proven disastrous in peacetime. This duality explains the central paradox of South Sudan's statehood: the possession of formal sovereign institutions coexisting with a pervasive reality of state collapse and renewed conflict. As Katete argues, the networks and behaviours honed during rebellion did not dissolve with independence but were instead repurposed, creating a class of 'conflict entrepreneurs' for whom the formal state apparatus became the primary site for resource extraction and political competition. This interpretation challenges linear narratives of state-building that view rebel governance merely as a preparatory phase. Instead, the legacies are better understood as a set of competing institutional logics. The comparative analysis demonstrates how the SPLM/A's reliance on militarised control and patronage, necessary for wartime survival, directly subverted the development of impersonal bureaucracy and rule-based authority after 2011. The findings align with Alusala et al. , who note that conflict management in South Sudan remains dominated by the same elite bargaining and factional politics that characterised the rebel movement, rather than evolving into inclusive, institutionalised processes. Consequently, the state formation project became a zero-sum struggle for the control of oil revenues and security forces, not a collective endeavour to build public goods. This is starkly visible in the catastrophic consequences for human security, where, as Olsen et al. illustrate through satellite data, conflict-driven cropland abandonment has been a direct result of these governance failures, exacerbating food insecurity on a national scale. Furthermore, the discussion must engage with the tension between these corrosive top-down legacies and the resilient, bottom-up social infrastructures that also constitute a governance legacy. The analysis reveals that in spaces where the central state's predatory reach is limited, community-based structures have often sustained a degree of order and service provision. Bedigen highlights the enduring relevance of indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms, which represent a parallel legacy of social governance that exists in an uneasy, often antagonistic relationship with the formal state. This underscores that 'rebel governance legacies' are not monolithic; they include both the SPLM/A's hierarchical command structures and the localised, customary practices upon which the rebellion sometimes drew for legitimacy and local administration. The failure of the post-independence state, therefore, stems partly from its inability to synthesise or constructively engage with this latter, more socially embedded legacy, instead prioritising the consolidation of militarised power. The public health catastrophe documented by Aderinto and Olatunji serves as a potent indicator of these legacy effects. The systematic neglect of health infrastructure, the weaponisation of humanitarian access, and the diversion of state resources reflect the continuation of a wartime logic where population welfare is subordinate to military and political objectives. This connects to a broader theme in the literature on post-conflict transitions: the critical juncture of independence was not used to transform governance modalities but to entrench them. The findings suggest that international recognition and the influx of resources upon statehood can, perversely, strengthen the most destructive aspects of rebel legacies by providing a larger treasury to contest without imposing effective constraints. The discussion thus positions South Sudan's experience as a cautionary case study in how the very strategies that enable a rebel group to capture a state can render that state incapable of functioning for its citizenry, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of instability and suffering. Furthermore, the persistence of conflict entrepreneurship, a direct legacy of rebel-era economic practices, continues to corrode state formation

efforts. As noted by Katete, the protracted civil war fostered a class of actors whose power and profit are contingent upon the perpetuation of instability and weak formal governance. These networks, often embedded within state structures, actively subvert institutional development by diverting resources and perpetuating localised violence to maintain control over lucrative informal markets. This creates a perverse incentive structure that directly contradicts peacebuilding objectives, as the consolidation of a functional, bureaucratic state would undermine their economic and political standing. Consequently, initiatives aimed at disarmament or economic unification frequently meet with resistance not only from communal militias but from within the very apparatus meant to implement them. This entrenched political economy of conflict presents a formidable barrier to moving from a militarised rebellion to a demilitarised civil administration. The devastating humanitarian consequences of this stalled transition, exacerbated by climate shocks, further illustrate the state's limited authority and capacity. Research by Olsen et al. utilising satellite remote sensing reveals how conflict-driven cropland abandonment has severely exacerbated food insecurity, a crisis that state institutions have been unable to mitigate. This environmental and agricultural devastation is compounded by a collapsed public health infrastructure, a situation tragically mirrored by the spillover effects of the 2023 Sudan conflict, which saw an influx of refugees and the disruption of supply routes, straining an already broken system. The state's inability to provide these most basic public goods—food security and health—undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, who often revert to relying on the very rebel-era networks or humanitarian agencies for survival. This perpetuates a cycle where informal, often localised, governance fills the vacuum left by the absent state, further entrenching fragmented authority. Amidst these challenges, the potential for a more inclusive form of statecraft exists, albeit in nascent forms. The legacy of rebel governance was not solely militaristic; it also fostered specific, if constrained, models of localised leadership and community mobilisation. Insights from studies on African social enterprises, such as those by Jeong and Compion, highlight how grassroots, participatory leadership models that emphasise empathy and collective action can achieve resilience in fragile contexts. Parallels can be drawn with indigenous peacebuilding practices in South Sudan, which, as Bedigen argues, offer critical frameworks for reconciliation and localised dispute resolution that are often more trusted than top-down state mechanisms. Integrating these organic, community-owned processes into the formal architecture of the state presents a complex but necessary avenue for building legitimacy. The future of state formation may therefore depend less on importing monolithic institutional blueprints and more on the careful, respectful hybridisation of formal structures with these resilient, context-specific practices of governance and social cohesion that emerged both during and in spite of the long rebellion.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the trajectory of post-conflict state formation in South Sudan has been decisively shaped, and ultimately crippled, by the specific character of its rebel governance legacies (John, 2024). The research problem centred on understanding why the achievement of sovereign statehood in 2011 precipitated not consolidation but collapse. The answer lies in the paradoxical nature of the inheritance from the SPLM/A: a ready-made administrative shell was fatally infused with a militarised, predatory, and exclusionary political logic. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the networks and institutions which secured military victory were fundamentally ill-suited for, and often actively hostile to, the tasks of inclusive peacebuilding and public service

delivery. Consequently, South Sudan's state became a prize for capture by conflict entrepreneurs, as Katete describes, rather than a framework for collective welfare. The implications of this conclusion are significant for both scholarship and policy (Iyalita, 2023). For African Studies and comparative politics, it underscores the necessity of moving beyond a focus on whether rebel governance exists to a deeper analysis of its qualitative character and the enduring political economies it fosters. The case of South Sudan illustrates that legacies are not neutral institutional blueprints; they are power-laden pathways that can lock in destructive practices after conflict formally ends. For policymakers and practitioners engaged in supporting post-conflict transitions, the findings sound a stark warning against the premature international legitimisation and resourcing of state structures before they undergo substantive transformation. As Alusala et al. imply, effective conflict management requires dismantling the winner-takes-all systems rebel victories often install.

Looking forward, the path out of this legacy trap is fraught but not imperceptible (Katete, 2023). It requires a fundamental reorientation of political authority away from militarised patronage and towards social accountability. This will inevitably involve engaging with the other, neglected legacy highlighted in this study: the indigenous peacebuilding and local governance infrastructures documented by Bedigen. A sustainable state in South Sudan may depend less on importing foreign models and more on building a hybrid polity that can integrate the legitimacy and conflict-resolution capacities of these community-level systems with a demilitarised central authority. Furthermore, as John argues, any viable future must also confront intersecting existential threats, such as climate change, which exacerbate food insecurity and resource competition, thereby fuelling the very conflicts that the unreformed state cannot manage. The devastating impacts on public health and food security, as shown by Aderinto and Olatunji and Olsen et al (Alusala et al., 2023), respectively, are the ultimate measure of state failure. Therefore, the most urgent next steps for research and practice must be to investigate modalities for leveraging local agency and residual social cohesion to deliver basic protections and services, even in the absence of a functional central state. This entails a shift in focus from state-building as an elite-driven institutional project to peacebuilding as a grassroots-led social process. Ultimately, overcoming the destructive legacies of rebel governance in South Sudan will necessitate not just new political agreements, but a profound societal reckoning with the modes of power that have brought independence but denied its promises to the people.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the literature on post-conflict state formation by empirically analysing how the specific governance legacies of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) have shaped institutional development in South Sudan since independence. It provides a nuanced, historically grounded framework for understanding the persistence of parallel governance structures and militarised patronage between 2021 and 2024. The research offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners by demonstrating that contemporary state-building challenges are not merely a product of recent conflict but are deeply rooted in the rebel governance models institutionalised during the long liberation struggle.

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