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COMPARATIVE STUDY

A Comparative Analysis of Peace Agreement Implementation

The 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS)

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ABSTRACT

This article conducts a comparative study of the implementation of South Sudan's two principal contemporary peace accords. It examines the structural, political, and institutional factors that have shaped their divergent trajectories. Through a focused comparison of the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS, the analysis identifies persistent obstacles to sustainable peace, including elite intransigence, security sector reform logjams, and the marginalisation of civil society. The study argues that while the R-ARCSS incorporated lessons from the ARCSS's collapse, its implementation has been undermined by similar pathologies, revealing a cyclical pattern of elite bargaining that privileges power-sharing over transformative change. The findings contribute to broader debates on hybrid peace governance and the challenges of post-conflict state-building in Africa.

Keywords: *South Sudan peace process, ARCSS implementation, R-ARCSS comparative analysis, Elite bargaining, Security sector reform, Hybrid peace governance, Power-sharing agreements, Post-conflict state-building*

Article Highlights

- Identifies cyclical patterns of elite intransigence undermining both agreements
- Examines security sector reform logjams as critical implementation failures
- Analyzes how power-sharing designs perpetuate rather than resolve conflict drivers
- Foregrounds the marginalization of civil society in peace governance

Core Research Puzzle

Why has the 'revitalised' R-ARCSS faced similar implementation challenges as its predecessor, despite explicit institutional learning from the ARCSS collapse?

This analysis offers critical insights for policymakers designing context-sensitive peace interventions in fragile states.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope was swiftly eclipsed by a devastating internal conflict that erupted in December 2013. The violence, rooted in political rivalry and deep-seated ethnic tensions, plunged the nation into a protracted civil war characterised by widespread atrocities, severe human suffering, and the collapse of state institutions. In response to this crisis, the international community and regional actors, particularly the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), spearheaded mediation efforts that yielded two landmark peace agreements: the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and its successor, the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). These comprehensive documents were designed not merely to cease hostilities but to establish a detailed roadmap for a transitional government, security sector reform, justice, reconciliation, and economic management. Their creation represents significant diplomatic investments and embodies the aspirations of the South Sudanese people for a durable peace. However, the trajectory of these agreements has underscored a persistent and critical challenge in African peace studies: the chasm between the signing of a peace accord and its effective implementation on the ground. The core research problem addressed in this article stems from the cyclical nature of peace agreement failure and renewal in South Sudan. The ARCSS unravelled in July 2016 with the resumption of large-scale conflict in the capital, Juba, demonstrating a catastrophic failure in implementation. The subsequent R-ARCSS was explicitly framed as a 'revitalised' pact, purportedly incorporating lessons learned from the shortcomings of its predecessor. This presents a compelling puzzle for analysis: despite institutional learning and the opportunity to redesign provisions based on prior experience, the implementation of the R-ARCSS has itself been plagued by delays, violations, and a precarious political process. This suggests that the obstacles to peace are not merely technical or design-based but are entrenched in the political economy of the conflict and the nature of the South Sudanese state. Consequently, the central research question guiding this comparative study is: In what ways did the design and implementation challenges of the R-ARCSS differ from those of the ARCSS, and to what extent does the 'revitalised' agreement represent a substantive evolution in addressing the root causes of South Sudan's conflict?

To interrogate this question, the article employs a structured comparative framework, analysing the two agreements across key thematic pillars that are critical to their success. These include the design of power-sharing arrangements, the timelines and sequencing of the security sector reform (especially the unification of forces), the approach to transitional justice and reconciliation, and the mechanisms for oversight and enforcement. This comparative lens is crucial for moving beyond a singular case study to identify patterns of continuity and change. It allows for an assessment of whether revisions in the R-ARCSS were merely cosmetic or represented a more profound attempt to mitigate the risks of elite defection and institutional collapse that doomed the ARCSS. The analysis is situated within the broader scholarly discourse on African peace studies, which grapples with the complexities of liberal peacebuilding models, the politics of post-conflict transitions, and the agency of regional security complexes like IGAD.

The contribution of this article is twofold. Firstly, it provides a systematic, in-depth comparative analysis of South Sudan's two major peace agreements, a scholarly exercise that remains relatively underexplored despite the obvious chronological and procedural linkage between the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS. Much of the existing literature examines each agreement in isolation or focuses on the broader

historical causes of the conflict. Secondly, by focusing squarely on implementation challenges, the study offers insights that are pertinent beyond South Sudan. It engages with critical debates on why meticulously negotiated peace agreements often stagnate after the signing ceremony, highlighting the interplay between elite bargaining, international leverage, and domestic legitimacy. The findings aim to enrich understanding of the inherent tensions in peace processes that seek to end violence while simultaneously attempting to transform the political and security structures that fuelled it. The structure of the article proceeds as follows. Following this introduction, the methodology section outlines the qualitative comparative approach, detailing the document analysis and process-tracing methods used to examine the agreements' design and implementation trajectories. The subsequent section provides the necessary contextual background on the conflict and the negotiation processes that led to both the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS. The core analytical chapters then present the comparative examination, first of the political

Methodology

This study employs a comparative case study design to systematically examine the implementation of the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The rationale for this approach lies in its capacity to generate nuanced insights into why similar agreements, negotiated within a short timeframe and involving largely the same principal actors, yielded divergent implementation trajectories. By holding constant contextual factors such as the country's political culture and underlying conflict drivers, the comparison allows for a more focused analysis of the agreements' structural provisions, the evolution of implementation mechanisms, and the shifting strategies of signatory parties. The ARCSS serves as the foundational case, whose collapse provides the critical context for the revitalisation process, while the R-ARCSS represents the subsequent attempt to rectify identified shortcomings. To trace the causal pathways and mechanisms that shaped implementation outcomes, the research integrates the comparative method with process-tracing. This analytical technique is particularly suited to examining complex political processes over time, as it seeks to identify the sequence of events and decisions that link the initial conditions of each agreement to their observed outcomes. The analysis focuses on key implementation phases—including the pre-transitional period, the formation of revitalised governance institutions, and security sector reforms—as well as critical junctures where the trajectory of implementation was significantly altered. Process-tracing enables the investigation of whether the provisions within the R-ARCSS, such as its revised power-sharing formula and modified security arrangements, effectively addressed the implementation failures that doomed its predecessor, or whether deeper, unaddressed pathologies persisted. The research draws upon a triangulated corpus of qualitative data to construct a robust evidentiary foundation. Primary documentary sources form the core of the analysis. These include the full texts of the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS, which are subjected to detailed textual comparison to identify substantive changes in structure, timelines, and substantive commitments. This is supplemented by a review of official reports from the agreement monitoring bodies, notably those issued by the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC). As noted in its periodic reports, R-JMEC provides a continuous assessment of implementation progress and obstacles, offering a vital institutional perspective on the process. Furthermore, reports from the United Nations Mission in South

Sudan (UNMISS) and the United Nations Panel of Experts on South Sudan are consulted to provide independent verification and context on the security and humanitarian situation. To complement documentary analysis and incorporate elite perspectives, this study utilises data from semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample of interviewees was identified, comprising individuals with direct involvement in or expert knowledge of the peace processes. This included former members of the now-defunct Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC) for the ARCSS, regional diplomats engaged in the mediation efforts, and South Sudanese civil society leaders who participated in the peace forums. These interviews, conducted both in-person and virtually between 2020 and 2023, provided insights into the political calculations of the parties, the internal dynamics of the negotiation forums, and the practical challenges encountered during the implementation phases. The perspectives gleaned from these discussions help to illuminate the ‘black box’ of decision-making that is often opaque in official documents. The methodological approach is not without its limitations, which must be acknowledged. First, significant access constraints posed a challenge. The sensitive and often dangerous political environment in South Sudan limited the ability to conduct interviews with certain high-ranking signatories to the agreements or military commanders, whose firsthand accounts would have been invaluable. Consequently, the analysis of elite motivations relies partly on the public statements of these actors and the interpretations of well-placed observers. Second, concerns regarding data reliability are pertinent. Official government statements and reports from the parties to the conflict may reflect strategic narratives rather than objective accounts of implementation. To mitigate this, the research prioritises data triangulation, cross-referencing party claims with the assessments of independent monitoring mechanisms like R-JMEC and UNMISS, as well as the testimonies of civil society actors. Finally, as a qualitative study focusing on two specific cases, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable but rather to provide analytical generalisation about the factors influencing peace agreement implementation in contexts characterised by fragile statehood and elite political rivalry.

Comparative Analysis

The institutional architecture and power-sharing formulae of the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS represent a fundamental evolution in design, reflecting lessons from the catastrophic collapse of the 2015 accord. The ARCSS established a complex, top-heavy transitional government of national unity (TGoNU) with a rigid power-sharing matrix that apportioned percentages of executive, legislative, and state-level positions among the warring parties. This formulaic approach, while attempting to balance interests, effectively institutionalised ethno-political patronage as the core state function, creating a zero-sum competition for appointed positions rather than a framework for genuine governance. In stark contrast, the R-ARCSS significantly expanded this architecture, most notably by increasing the number of vice-presidential positions and integrating a broader array of armed and political factions into the revitalised transitional government (RTGoNU). This expansion was a direct response to the fragmentation of factions following the ARCSS collapse, aiming to buy in a wider coalition through the distribution of prebendal offices. However, this more inclusive high-level formula further bloated the executive and entrenched a system of elite accommodation that deferred critical questions of institutional reform and public accountability. Divergent trajectories in security sector reform (SSR) and the unification of forces underscore a central

paradox of both agreements: the treatment of military integration as a prerequisite for political stability rather than its outcome. Under the ARCSS, the process of creating a unified, professional national army was chronically delayed, underfunded, and plagued by mistrust, ultimately becoming a primary flashpoint for the return to conflict in 2016. The cantonment, screening, and training of forces were logistical and political failures, revealing that elites maintained a vested interest in controlling separate militias as instruments of coercion and bargaining power. The R-ARCSS learned rhetorically from this failure, placing the unification of forces on a more detailed, phased timeline and within a more complex security arrangement. Yet, in practice, the process under the R-ARCSS has mirrored the inertia of its predecessor. Cantonment sites have faced severe humanitarian crises, training has been inconsistent, and the eventual graduation of unified forces has been repeatedly postponed or conducted symbolically without meaningful integration into a coherent command structure. This stagnation demonstrates that security elites, now even more numerous within the expanded power-sharing arrangement, perceive a unified national army as a threat to their personal political survival, preferring the maintenance of parallel forces.

The role of regional guarantors, particularly the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), evolved significantly between the two agreements, shifting from a primary mediation authority to a weakened enforcement mechanism enmeshed in regional politics. IGAD's high-level mediation, which produced the ARCSS, was initially hailed as a model of African-led solutions. However, its enforcement mechanism, the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC), lacked any coercive capacity to hold parties accountable for blatant violations, a flaw that became fatal. Following the collapse, IGAD's leverage diminished further. The revitalised process that yielded the R-ARCSS was characterised by a more fragmented regional engagement, where member states' bilateral interests in South Sudan often conflicted with collective peacemaking goals. The reconstituted monitoring body, the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), faces the same structural impotence as its predecessor, reliant on diplomatic persuasion and the goodwill of parties fundamentally opposed to its mandate. Consequently, regional enforcement has remained largely ceremonial, unable to impose costs on signatories for non-compliance with critical provisions like SSR or financial transparency.

The inclusion of civil society and sub-national actors presents a nuanced comparative picture, where rhetorical expansion in the R-ARCSS masks persistent patterns of exclusion from substantive decision-making. The ARCSS paid limited attention to civil society, treating the conflict primarily as a military-political dispute between elite belligerents. The R-ARCSS, acknowledging this democratic deficit, incorporated a broader range of stakeholders into its architecture, including provisions for a more inclusive National Constitutional Review Commission and nominal representation in some transitional institutions. Nevertheless, this inclusion has been largely superficial. The core political and security arrangements remain the exclusive preserve of military-political elites, who view civil society with suspicion. Sub-national conflicts, particularly at the local level in

Discussion

The comparative analysis of the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS reveals a stark continuity: the persistent failure to translate signed commitments into durable peace and transformative governance. This pattern cannot be dismissed as mere technical failure or insufficient international pressure. Rather, the discussion must centre on how the very architecture of these agreements, designed to end violence, has

inadvertently entrenched a system that perpetuates implementation deficits. The core argument here is that these deficits are a direct function of an elite political economy, wherein peace agreements become instruments for regulating elite competition and resource-sharing, rather than blueprints for genuine national reform or public service. Both agreements, by prioritising elite accommodation above all else, served to formalise and legitimise a militarised patronage system. The proliferation of vice-presidential positions, ministerial portfolios, and military ranks under the R-ARCSS, as noted by de Waal and others, was not an oversight but a deliberate strategy to purchase a ceasefire. This created a ‘cartel of elites’ whose primary commitment is to the maintenance of their shared access to state resources, not to the implementation of security sector reform, constitution-making, or transitional justice. The repeated integration of commanders and their forces without genuine unification or demobilisation, as Pinaud observes, simply enlarges the payroll of a parasitic state, making the cost of peace unsustainable and reinforcing the very militarised identities the agreements sought to dissolve. Consequently, critical provisions concerning accountability, such as the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, remain perpetually dormant, as they pose an existential threat to the impunity that binds the elite pact together. The implementation deficit is therefore structural; it is a rational outcome for signatories who benefit more from the process of agreement—and the associated international legitimacy and financial flows—than from its substantive outcomes. This leads to a fundamental critique of the ‘stability-first’ model that has underpinned both regional (IGAD) and international approaches to South Sudan. This model operates on the assumption that silencing the guns among major belligerents through power-sharing creates a platform for gradual reform. The South Sudanese case powerfully refutes this logic. The stability achieved is illusory and ephemeral, a mere ‘non-war’ that consolidates a violent kleptocratic order. By focusing exclusively on elite bargains in capital cities, the model systematically marginalises the South Sudanese public, civil society, and broader constituencies. As Kindersley and Rolandsen argue, this exclusion denies the peace process a foundational source of legitimacy and externalises its ownership. The public becomes a passive audience to a political theatre played out by armed elites and foreign mediators, with no mechanism for holding signatories to account. The ‘stability-first’ approach thus confuses the absence of major conventional warfare with positive peace, failing to address the everyday violence, economic predation, and political exclusion that continue to characterise the South Sudanese state. It is a model that, in prioritising elite accommodation, actively undermines the possibility of building a social contract based on public accountability and service delivery. The implications of this analysis for peacebuilding theory are significant. It challenges core tenets of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm, which assumes that institutional templates—elections, security sector reform, constitutional reviews—can be successfully transplanted once a political settlement is reached. In South Sudan, these liberal institutions are hollowed out and repurposed by elite networks, becoming yet another arena for resource competition rather than instruments of public governance. The case underscores the critical importance of political economy analysis, demonstrating that formal institutions are powerless against the informal, shadowy networks of accumulation that constitute real power. Furthermore, it complicates narratives of African agency in peace processes. While IGAD’s leadership exemplifies regional ownership, the form this agency has taken—the mediation of elite deals—has often reproduced problematic governance structures. Agency, therefore, must be critically assessed not merely as the presence of African mediators, but in terms of whose interests that agency ultimately serves and whether it fosters inclusive political communities. Given the profound limitations of top-down, elite-centric agreements, the discussion must turn to

alternative pathways. A sole reliance on revitalising or renegotiating the R-ARCSS framework risks repeating the same cycle. Therefore, potential may lie in fostering adaptive governance and supporting locally-led initiatives that operate on different logics. These are not a substitute for a national political settlement but could create pockets of resilience and alternative models of authority. Community-based reconciliation processes, local peace agreements between sub-national groups, and civil society

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of the ARCSS and the R-ARCSS elucidates the persistent, cyclical challenges of peace implementation in South Sudan. The central argument advanced is that both agreements, despite the latter's more inclusive rhetoric and structural refinements, remain fundamentally constrained by an elite-centric model of peacemaking. This model, which prioritises power-sharing among a narrow political-military elite at the national level, has repeatedly proven insufficient for generating a self-sustaining peace. The R-ARCSS, while learning from the catastrophic collapse of its predecessor by broadening signatory participation and elaborating on critical governance and security timelines, ultimately reproduced the core flaw: it treated peace as a commodity to be distributed within a closed political marketplace, rather than as a foundational social contract with the South Sudanese populace. Consequently, the implementation of both accords has been characterised by protracted delays, repeated violations, and a consistent subordination of peacebuilding milestones to the exigencies of elite bargaining and survival. The comparative insights reveal a pattern where technical improvements in agreement design are systematically undermined by unaddressed political pathologies. The ARCSS's fatal weakness was its exclusion of key factions, making its collapse almost inevitable. The R-ARCSS sought to rectify this by including previously excluded leaders, thereby achieving a more credible ceasefire at the outset. However, this very inclusivity further entrenched a governance system based on ethno-political patronage, as the expanded peace dividend was primarily consumed by accommodating more elite interests into the state apparatus. The security sector reforms, though more detailed in the R-ARCSS, have stalled similarly, as the proposed unification of forces threatens the patronage networks that underpin the authority of the signatories. Thus, the cycle continues: agreements are signed, implementation stagnates amid elite recalcitrance, violence persists at sub-national levels, and international mediators focus on resuscitating the same elite bargain, albeit with adjusted quotas. To break this costly cycle, future mediation and international implementation support must consciously pivot towards strategies that dilute the overwhelming concentration of power and resources at the centre. Policy recommendations must therefore extend beyond technical support for timelines and focus on altering the political incentives that currently perpetuate conflict. First, mediators should institutionalise substantive sub-national representation in all peace negotiations, moving beyond mere consultation to granting formal decision-making roles to civil society, women's groups, and community leaders from conflict-affected regions. This would help to counterbalance the militarised elite and anchor discussions in communal security needs. Second, international partners must condition financial and political support on transparent, verifiable progress in security unification and the demilitarisation of civilian politics, rather than on the mere formation of another unity government. Aid and development financing should be increasingly channelled through and to local government structures, bypassing Juba where possible, to build alternative centres of accountable governance and service delivery. Finally, a more robust and coordinated regional posture is required, one that moves beyond

diplomatic persuasion to enacting meaningful consequences, such as targeted sanctions on assets and travel for individuals who wilfully obstruct implementation, regardless of their official status. These recommendations underscore the necessity for a reorientation in both research and practice. Future scholarly inquiry should move beyond the high-level political analysis of Juba to engage deeply with sub-national peace dynamics. There is a pressing need for granular studies on how local reconciliation mechanisms, cross-community trade, and civil society activism function amidst the stagnation of national agreements, offering potential blueprints for bottom-up peace consolidation . Furthermore, comparative regional studies could yield valuable insights; analysing South Sudan's peace processes against those in neighbouring Sudan, the Central African Republic, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo would help to distinguish context-specific challenges from broader syndromes of post-liberation state collapse and elite predation. Such research would illuminate whether the elite-centric model is a uniquely South Sudanese predicament or a regional pattern requiring a reconceived international mediation toolkit. In conclusion, the journey from the ARCSS to the R-ARCSS represents not a linear path to peace, but a revelatory loop highlighting the intractable nature of elite pacts absent deeper structural transformation. The revitalised agreement, for all its procedural advances, has yet to catalyse a fundamental shift from a logic of war to a logic of peace. The enduring lesson

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by providing a granular, contemporary analysis of the localised peacebuilding mechanisms operating in South Sudan between 2021 and 2025. It challenges prevailing state-centric frameworks by empirically foregrounding the agency of customary authorities and women's groups in sustaining communal peace amidst national political instability. The research offers a critical, evidence-based assessment of the hybrid peace model, yielding practical insights for policymakers and NGOs designing context-sensitive interventions. Furthermore, it enriches the scholarly discourse in African Studies by presenting updated field data that captures the evolving dynamics of conflict resolution in the world's youngest nation.