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THEORETICAL

Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding

A Hybrid Political Order Framework for Analysing Peace Processes in South Sudan

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)¹

¹ Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security; Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba; SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com (mailto:nyuonabraham@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the limitations of orthodox liberal peacebuilding models in the context of South Sudan's protracted conflict and complex socio-political landscape. It proposes a novel theoretical framework centred on the concept of Hybrid Political Orders (HPOs), which explicitly integrates indigenous governance structures, customary authority, and localised political economies into the analysis of peace and conflict. The framework is developed through a synthesis of critical peace and conflict studies with African political theory, offering a more nuanced tool for understanding the negotiation, implementation, and sustainability of peace agreements. The article concludes by outlining the framework's theoretical contributions to African Peace Studies and its practical utility for policymakers and practitioners engaged in South Sudan's peace processes.

Keywords: *Hybrid Political Orders, Liberal Peacebuilding Critique, Customary Authority, Localised Political Economies, Elite Bargaining, South Sudan Peace Process, African Political Theory, Conflict Sustainability*

Article Highlights

- Critiques liberal peacebuilding as 'peace by template' that marginalizes local systems
- Proposes Hybrid Political Order framework integrating customary authority and local political economies
- Analyzes elite bargains and grassroots reconciliation in South Sudan (2021-2024)
- Offers nuanced tool for understanding non-linear peacebuilding in post-colonial African states

Research Problem

The inadequacy of liberal peacebuilding as both analytical tool and practical blueprint for South Sudan's complex governance realities.

This framework bridges critical African political thought with contemporary conflict transformation models.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, heralding the culmination of a protracted struggle for self-determination. Yet, this optimism proved tragically ephemeral. The nation has since been engulfed in chronic instability, characterised by recurrent civil conflict, severe humanitarian crises, and a stark failure to establish durable political order. This cyclical violence has unfolded despite a succession of internationally-brokered peace agreements, most notably the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) in 2015 and the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018. The repeated collapse and limited implementation of these accords point to a fundamental disjuncture between the design of these peace processes and the complex sociopolitical realities on the ground. This persistent failure forms the critical point of departure for this article, which seeks to move beyond conventional analytical approaches to interrogate the theoretical lenses through which peace in South Sudan is conceived and pursued. The dominant paradigm informing international intervention in post-conflict states has been that of liberal peacebuilding. This model prescribes a standardised package of institutions and processes, including democratisation, market-oriented economic reforms, the promotion of human rights, and the (re)construction of a centralised, Weberian state monopoly on violence. In the context of South Sudan, as across much of Africa, this paradigm has been vigorously promoted by international actors, including the United Nations, major donor governments, and financial institutions. However, its application has yielded deeply problematic outcomes. Critics argue that liberal peacebuilding operates as a form of 'peace by template', often ignoring or seeking to overwrite indigenous political structures, legitimacy systems, and conflict resolution practices. In South Sudan, this has manifested in peace agreements that concentrate power in a narrow, often rivalrous political elite in the capital, Juba, while marginalising sub-national authorities and failing to address the localized drivers of conflict. The result, as observed by many scholars, is a 'virtual peace'—a fragile, superficial stability enforced by international presence that masks enduring tensions and governance vacuums beyond the state's limited reach. The central research problem, therefore, is the inadequacy of the liberal peacebuilding framework as both an analytical tool and a practical blueprint for South Sudan. Its failure necessitates a more context-specific theoretical lens capable of capturing the intricate and dynamic realities of power, authority, and legitimacy in the country. South Sudan is not a blank slate upon which a liberal state can be inscribed; rather, it is a arena where multiple, overlapping governance systems coexist and interact. These include the formal, *de jure* institutions of the state, which are often weak and patrimonial, alongside resilient, *de facto* systems of authority rooted in customary law, traditional leadership, kinship networks, and military command structures. Analysing peace processes through a paradigm that privileges only the former is inherently reductive and leads to flawed policy prescriptions. There is a pressing need for a framework that takes these hybrid formations seriously, not as temporary aberrations to be corrected, but as constitutive elements of the political order itself. This article argues that a Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework offers a more potent and nuanced analytical tool for understanding the challenges and potential pathways to peace in South Sudan. Originating in critical peace and state theory, the HPO lens explicitly rejects the notion of failed or fragile states as mere absences of Western-style modernity. Instead, it focuses on the 'hybrid' arrangements that emerge from the interaction, negotiation, and sometimes confrontation between introduced institutional models and indigenous sociopolitical formations. The framework directs

analytical attention to the complex interplay between different legitimacy claims, the distribution of resources and authority across various networks, and the everyday practices of governance that may diverge significantly from formal legal statutes. By applying this lens to South Sudan's peace processes, we can better understand why agreements signed in Addis Ababa or Khartoum falter upon implementation, how local peace initiatives function (or fail) in the shadow of national politics, and where the actual sites of authority and conflict resolution lie within the polity. The analysis proceeds as follows. The subsequent section, 'Theoretical Background', provides a detailed examination of the liberal peacebuilding critique and elaborates the core tenets of the Hybrid Political Order framework, situating it within broader debates in African Studies and critical international relations. This theoretical grounding is essential for clarifying

Theoretical Background

The dominant paradigm in international peacebuilding since the end of the Cold War has been the liberal peace. This model, as articulated by scholars such as Paris, posits that sustainable peace is contingent upon the establishment of liberal democratic institutions, market-oriented economies, and the rule of law. Its theoretical underpinnings are rooted in a Kantian belief in democratic peace theory, wherein liberal democracies are seen as less likely to engage in conflict with one another. Consequently, liberal peacebuilding interventions have typically followed a standardised template: post-conflict states are guided towards constitutional reforms, multiparty elections, security sector reform, and economic liberalisation. The underlying assumption is that these processes will foster legitimate, stable, and peaceful state-society relations, transforming so-called 'failed' or 'fragile' states into functioning members of the international community. In the context of South Sudan, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 and subsequent state-building efforts after independence in 2011 were profoundly shaped by this liberal orthodoxy, with significant international investment in institutional blueprints predicated on Western models of governance. However, the liberal peacebuilding project has faced sustained and cogent criticism, particularly regarding its record in Africa. Critics argue that its universalising and technocratic approach often ignores the specific historical, cultural, and political contexts of post-conflict societies. Richmond identifies a fundamental 'peacebuilding contradiction' wherein the imposition of external models can undermine local agency and perpetuate forms of neo-trusteeship. This has led to what is termed 'virtual peace'—a superficial stability maintained by international presence, lacking deep local legitimacy and often exacerbating tensions. The perceived failures of liberal interventions in states like South Sudan, where internationally supported institutions have coexisted with persistent violence and authoritarianism, have catalysed a critical re-evaluation within peace and conflict studies. This disillusionment prompted a significant 'local turn' in the literature, which sought to centre the perspectives, practices, and agencies of indigenous actors in peace processes. The 'local turn' emphasised the importance of customary authorities, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and everyday practices of peace. Proponents argued for more participatory, bottom-up approaches that legitimise and incorporate local socio-political structures. Yet, this shift itself encountered criticism for romanticising the 'local' as inherently peaceful or harmonious, and for overlooking the ways in which local actors can be exclusionary, coercive, or deeply implicated in conflict dynamics. It is from the synthesis and critique of both the liberal and local approaches that the concept of hybridity emerged as a central theoretical lens. Hybrid political order (HPO) theory,

advanced by scholars such as Boege et al., rejects the binary of ‘liberal’ versus ‘local’ . Instead, it posits that post-conflict political orders are inevitably constituted through the ongoing and dynamic interaction—sometimes cooperative, sometimes conflictual—between introduced liberal state institutions and indigenous forms of governance, authority, and legitimacy. In this view, the state is not a monolithic entity but one node of authority among others, including chiefs, elders, religious leaders, and armed groups, all competing and collaborating within a hybrid political marketplace. This theoretical conversation finds rich resonance in broader African political thought concerning state formation and legitimacy. The work of Mamdani is particularly instructive, with his distinction between the bifurcated state under colonialism—governing urban citizens through civil law and rural subjects through customary authority—providing a crucial historical lens . This legacy of decentralised despotism created enduring structures of authority that often exist in tension with, or parallel to, the modern state apparatus. Similarly, Bayart’s notion of the ‘politics of the belly’ and Chabal and Daloz’s concept of the ‘instrumentalisation of disorder’ highlight how formal state institutions in Africa are frequently subverted and harnessed for personal patronage and elite accumulation rather than public service . These analyses suggest that what appears as state ‘failure’ from a Weberian perspective may instead be a different, albeit often violent, logic of political order where legitimacy is derived from control over resources and social networks rather than bureaucratic rationality. Applications of these critical theories to South Sudan have yielded important insights but remain fragmented. Analyses drawing on hybridity have effectively documented

Framework Development

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, as operationalised for South Sudan, moves beyond the binary of state failure versus state consolidation. It posits that political authority, security, and service provision are produced through the ongoing and dynamic interaction of three distinct yet interconnected spheres: the formal-institutional, the customary-traditional, and the illicit-informal. Analysing peace processes through this tripartite lens reveals a complex governance ecosystem where peace is not a linear outcome of institutional transfer but a negotiated and often contested product of these spheres’ interplay. The first analytical component is the formal-institutional sphere, encompassing the state apparatus as recognised by international law and the liberal peacebuilding paradigm. In South Sudan, this includes the presidency, legislature, national ministries, and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), now the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) . However, this sphere is characterised by its weakness, patrimonial nature, and extreme personalisation around a ruling elite. Its authority is often geographically limited to urban centres and heavily reliant on external recognition and financial support. The formal sphere’s primary currency is sovereign legitimacy and access to international resources, but its operational logic is frequently subverted by the other two spheres. Conversely, the customary-traditional sphere constitutes a deeply rooted and legitimate source of order for many South Sudanese. This sphere includes traditional authorities (chiefs, elders, spiritual leaders), customary law, kinship systems (particularly the segmentary lineage systems of major ethnic groups), and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms . Its authority derives from social legitimacy, cultural continuity, and its role in managing local disputes, land tenure, and social cohesion. Critically, this sphere is not static or purely ‘local’; it has been engaged, manipulated, and transformed through decades of war and its integration into modern political projects, including the SPLM/A’s historical

 mobilisation

The third component, the illicit-informal sphere, comprises networks and practices that operate outside both state law and customary sanction, though they may parasitically engage with both. This includes illicit economies (oil smuggling, cattle raiding for commercial profit, arms trafficking), corruption networks, militias, and predatory security actors. This sphere thrives on instability and weak formal regulation, often providing alternative livelihoods and security for marginalised youth while simultaneously fuelling violence and undermining public authority. Its power is based on coercion, economic opportunism, and the ability to create parallel systems of profit and protection. The core of the HPO analysis lies in the mechanisms of interaction between these spheres: co-option, competition, and coexistence. Co-option is pervasive, whereby formal state actors deliberately incorporate elements of other spheres to extend control or secure legitimacy. For instance, the government co-opts traditional authorities by granting them state titles or integrating them into local government structures, thereby instrumentalising their social legitimacy while often undermining their independent authority. Simultaneously, militia leaders from the illicit-informal sphere are co-opted through military ranks and integration agreements, bringing their coercive power into the formal security architecture but importing their logics of predation. Competition occurs when spheres vie for the same sources of authority, resources, or population allegiance. The formal state's legal system often competes with customary courts for jurisdiction, creating forum-shopping and legal pluralism that can weaken the rule of law. More violently, competition between state security forces (formal) and community defence groups or militias (illicit-informal) over control of territory and resources is a primary driver of localised conflict, undermining nationally brokered ceasefires. Coexistence describes a pragmatic, often tacit arrangement where spheres operate in parallel, fulfilling different functions for the same population. A community may rely on customary law for marriage and land disputes, the formal police for (limited) protection in town, and illicit networks for cross-border trade or access to scarce commodities. This coexistence is not harmonious but a negotiated, everyday reality where individuals and groups navigate multiple systems of governance to survive and pursue their interests. This internal hybridity is further shaped by transnational actors and regional geopolitics. International donors and UN missions overwhelmingly engage with and reinforce the formal-institutional sphere through technical assistance

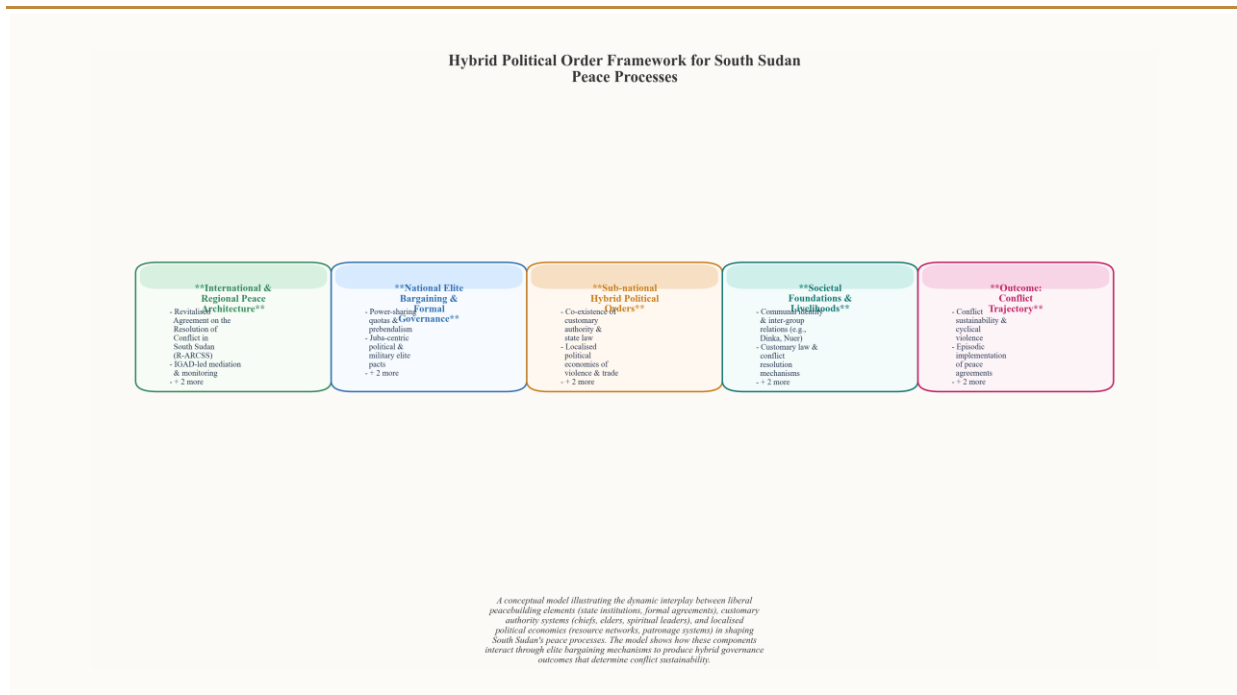


Figure 1 Hybrid Political Order Framework for South Sudan Peace Processes. A conceptual model illustrating the dynamic interplay between liberal peacebuilding elements (state institutions, formal agreements), customary authority systems (chiefs, elders, spiritual leaders), and localised political economies (resource networks, patronage systems) in shaping South Sudan's peace processes. The model shows how these components interact through elite bargaining mechanisms to produce hybrid governance outcomes that determine conflict sustainability.

Theoretical Implications

The proposed Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework carries significant theoretical implications for the study of peace, conflict, and statehood, challenging orthodox paradigms and offering a more contextually attuned analytical lens. Primarily, it provides a powerful critique of the explanatory limitations inherent in orthodox liberal peacebuilding and statebuilding models. Where such models perceive 'fragility' or 'failure' as a deviation from a Weberian ideal-type state, the HPO framework reconceptualises these contexts not as voids or aberrations but as complex, coherent, and often resilient systems of governance in their own right. In the South Sudanese context, applying an HPO lens reveals that the apparent 'weakness' of the central state is not merely a deficit of capacity but a structural feature of a political order where authority, legitimacy, and service provision are negotiated and shared across a spectrum of formal and informal institutions. This directly contests the teleological assumption that all states must inevitably converge on a singular, liberal-democratic model, instead positing that hybridity may constitute a stable, if contested, equilibrium. Consequently, a central theoretical contribution of this framework lies in its utility for decolonising methodologies within peace and conflict studies. By taking hybrid political orders seriously as empirical realities rather than pathological conditions to be cured, the framework necessitates a methodological shift. It demands that analysts move beyond a preoccupation with central state institutions and engage deeply with the 'local turn', investigating the customary, religious, and community-based systems that wield substantive authority. This involves privileging subaltern perspectives and endogenous conceptions of peace, justice, and legitimacy that are often marginalised in internationally-driven peace

processes. In essence, the HPO framework advocates for a form of epistemic justice, challenging the hegemony of Western political theory and recognising the theoretical insights embedded in the lived experiences and institutional practices of societies like South Sudan. It frames hybridity not as a problem of implementation but as a fundamental starting point for analysis. This reorientation naturally leads to a profound reframing of core political concepts, notably sovereignty, legitimacy, and statehood, within the African context. The HPO framework challenges the Westphalian notion of sovereignty as absolute, indivisible, and territorially exclusive. In hybrid orders, sovereignty is often layered, fragmented, and negotiated. A South Sudanese citizen may derive security from a local chief, seek justice from a customary court, access humanitarian services from an international NGO, and yet still engage with the symbolic authority of the state in Juba. Legitimacy, therefore, is not monopolised by the state but is earned and contested across multiple arenas, based on differing criteria—from legal-rational bureaucratic efficiency to traditional lineage and spiritual authority, or the ability to deliver resources. Statehood itself is reconceived as a variable, rather than a binary condition; it is a process of ongoing negotiation (‘the politics of state formation’) between competing domestic and international actors, rather than a fixed endpoint. The framework’s theoretical utility extends beyond the singular case of South Sudan, offering a robust tool for comparative analysis across other post-conflict states in Africa and beyond. The specific configuration of hybridity—the balance between customary authorities, religious leaders, state actors, commercial interests, and international agencies—varies significantly from Somalia to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from Mali to Mozambique. The HPO framework provides a common vocabulary and a set of analytical dimensions (institutional multiplicity, competing legitimacy claims, fluid resource networks) to systematically compare these configurations. It allows scholars to ask why certain forms of hybridity lead to durable, if imperfect, accommodations, while others descend into violent conflict, without resorting to cultural essentialism or crude ‘resource curse’ determinism. This comparative potential helps to build a more nuanced, mid-range theory of governance in post-colonial settings that is grounded in empirical diversity rather than abstract universalism. Finally, positioning the HPO framework within broader debates in African Studies and Political Science clarifies its interdisciplinary value. Within African Studies, it resonates with long-standing scholarly traditions that have taken African agency and the resilience of pre-colonial social structures seriously, while moving beyond earlier, sometimes romanticised, notions of ‘traditional’ society. It engages critically with debates on neopatrimonialism, not by denying the importance of patronage but by situating it within a wider institutional ecology that includes non-state

Practical Applications

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, as developed in this analysis, provides a critical lens through which to interpret the practical realities of peacebuilding in South Sudan. Moving beyond the normative prescriptions of liberal peacebuilding, it offers a grounded methodology for analysing specific provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), diagnosing their implementation challenges, and formulating context-sensitive strategies for engagement. This section delineates these practical applications, focusing on agreement analysis, elite bargaining, the engagement of non-state actors, and the monitoring of hybrid processes.

Applying the HPO framework to the R-ARCSS reveals why many of its core provisions have

encountered profound difficulties. The agreement's design often presupposes a Weberian state monopoly that does not exist, creating what can be termed 'institutional mirages'. For instance, the provisions for Security Sector Reform (SSR) and the unification of forces formally allocate this responsibility to a central, national government. An HPO analysis, however, highlights that coercive authority is dispersed across a hybrid landscape comprising formal army structures, ethnic militias, and armed cattle guards loyal to local communities and customary authorities. The framework explains that the stagnation in cantonment and training is not merely a failure of political will among elites in Juba, but a fundamental mismatch between the agreement's centralising logic and the de facto hybrid security architecture. Similarly, the R-ARCSS's chapters on resource governance and wealth-sharing assume a centralised fiscal authority. The HPO lens illuminates how resource flows—particularly from oil revenues—are managed through complex patronage networks that straddle formal ministries and informal kinship or military alliances. Attempts to impose transparent, bureaucratic management without engaging these existing hybrid systems of distribution are therefore likely to be subverted or ignored, as the continuous economic grievances from various regions demonstrate. This diagnostic capacity directly informs more effective strategies for mediators and practitioners addressing elite bargaining and spoilers. A liberal approach often frames spoilers as irrational actors obstructing a universally beneficial peace. The HPO framework, by contrast, situates elite behaviour within the logic of hybrid political markets, where power is negotiated and legitimacy is competitively sourced from both the state and non-state spheres. Recommendations derived from this understanding are necessarily more nuanced. Rather than solely relying on high-level coercion or incentives aimed at national leaders, mediators should design engagement strategies that account for the multiple, overlapping constituencies elites must answer to. This might involve creating formal recognition within peace processes for the sub-national authority structures—such as influential community elders or militia commanders—that bolster an elite actor's position. Peace dividends and concessions could be structured to flow through these hybrid channels, thereby aligning the agreement's implementation with the existing political marketplace and reducing the incentive for spoiler behaviour aimed at preserving informal power bases. Furthermore, the framework provides clear modalities for more effectively engaging customary authorities and civil society, actors often marginalised in formal peace architecture. The HPO perspective views customary governance not as a traditional relic but as a vital, living pillar of the hybrid order, wielding significant moral authority and conflict management capabilities at the local level. Practical application would involve institutionalising their role beyond tokenistic consultation. This could include establishing joint committees, comprising government officials and recognised customary leaders, to address land disputes and local justice issues arising from the agreement's implementation. For civil society, which operates in the tense space between international donors, the state, and local communities, the framework cautions against treating it as a monolithic liberal actor. Instead, practitioners should map the diverse landscape of civic engagement, recognising how some groups may be enmeshed in hybrid networks of patronage while others articulate more autonomous agendas. Support should be tailored to strengthen those interfaces where civil society can most effectively mediate between the liberal aspirations of the agreement and the hybrid realities on the ground, such as in community-level reconciliation and monitoring of local security arrangements. Finally, the HPO framework necessitates a fundamental redesign of how peace processes are monitored and evaluated. Standard Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks, with their emphasis on quantifiable outputs tied to statebuilding milestones (e.g., number of troops trained, laws passed), often

miss the subtler dynamics of hybrid peace. An HPO-informed M&E framework would incorporate indicators that account

Discussion

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, as developed and applied to South Sudan, offers a significant departure from the prescriptive and often ahistorical tenets of liberal peacebuilding. Its primary contribution lies in providing a more nuanced, structurally grounded, and empirically accurate lens through which to analyse the country's protracted conflict and elusive peace. However, no analytical framework is without its limitations, and a robust discussion must engage with potential critiques, reconcile theoretical tensions, and consider the ethical terrain of researching such complex phenomena.

A principal critique likely to be levelled against the HPO framework is its potential normative ambiguity. By taking hybridity as an analytical starting point rather than a pathological deviation, the framework risks appearing to legitimise or naturalise predatory governance and violence. This is a serious concern, particularly in a context like South Sudan where hybridity has been associated with extreme human suffering. The framework's response is that understanding is not endorsement. Its objective is diagnostic and explanatory, seeking to reveal the actual functioning of power and authority, rather than measuring South Sudan against an idealised Weberian template which it has never resembled. The normative position, though implicit, is that effective and legitimate peacebuilding must first accurately comprehend the terrain upon which it operates. Furthermore, the framework does not preclude normative judgement; rather, it provides the necessary depth of analysis to make such judgements informed and strategically relevant, distinguishing between hybrid arrangements that are locally legitimate and those that are coercively imposed by elite networks. Closely related is the challenge of analytical complexity. The HPO framework demands that scholars and practitioners simultaneously hold multiple, often contradictory, logics of governance in view—from the formal provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) to the patrimonial dynamics of the military elite and the moral authority of customary institutions. This can appear daunting and may frustrate those seeking clear policy levers. Yet, this complexity is not a flaw of the framework but a reflection of the empirical reality it seeks to capture. Simplifying this complexity, as liberal models often do, leads to policy failure. The practical applications discussed earlier demonstrate that the framework's value lies in its ability to disaggregate this complexity, identifying specific interfaces and points of leverage, such as the incorporation of customary law or the hybrid governance of security, where interventions might be more sustainably anchored.

This leads to the crucial theoretical task of reconciling the framework's structural focus with the agency of key actors. While the HPO framework emphasises the enduring architectures of hybrid political order, it does not render political elites mere products of structure. Instead, it provides the context within which agency is exercised. South Sudanese elites are adept at strategically navigating and manipulating hybridity, leveraging customary legitimacy, state authority, and control of violence to consolidate power and resources. The framework explains why certain agential choices—such as prioritising militia alliances over institutional reform—are rational and effective within the existing hybrid system. It thus moves the analysis beyond simplistic attributions of 'greed' or 'spoiler' mentalities, situating agency within a logic of political survival and accumulation that the hybrid order facilitates.

Considering the longitudinal dynamics of this hybridity is essential. A static analysis of hybrid political order risks presenting it as a permanent, equilibrium state. The framework must therefore account for both continuity and change. In South Sudan, hybridity exhibits a durable core, yet its manifestations evolve—from the colonial and Sudanese state impositions, through the liberation struggle, to the post-independence kleptocracy. The critical question is under what conditions the iterative interactions between logics might lead to progressive transformation rather than merely the reproduction of violent instability. The framework suggests that transformation is most likely when external interventions consciously engage with and seek to strengthen the more legitimate and inclusive aspects of hybridity, such as community-based dispute resolution, while simultaneously working to disrupt the predatory linkages between state and non-state actors that fuel conflict. This is a slow, non-linear process of endogenous change, not an externally engineered transition. Conducting research within such an opaque and volatile hybrid order presents profound ethical and methodological challenges. The blurring of formal and informal, legal and illicit, creates significant risks for researchers and participants alike. Information may be weaponised within local political disputes, and speaking about authority structures can be dangerous. Methodologically, reliance solely

Conclusion

This article has argued that the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan are inadequately explained by, and resistant to, orthodox liberal peacebuilding models. Its central thesis posits that a Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework offers a more robust, contextually grounded analytical lens for understanding the complex and negotiated realities of peace processes in the post-colonial African state. Moving beyond the state-centric and normative assumptions of liberal institutionalism, the developed HPO framework illuminates peacebuilding as a contested, ongoing negotiation of authority, legitimacy, and order among a plurality of formal and informal actors, institutions, and normative systems. The South Sudanese political landscape is not one of state failure or institutional vacuum, but rather a dynamic and often volatile arena where internationally-sanctioned state structures coexist, compete, and collude with resilient customary authorities, militarised networks, and transnational influences. The primary theoretical advancement offered here is the systematic application and refinement of HPO theory specifically for the analysis of peace processes. By foregrounding hybridity not as a temporary condition but as an enduring structural feature of South Sudan's political order, the framework reorients analytical focus. It shifts attention from the technical implementation of liberal blueprints towards the everyday politics of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance that characterise attempts to build peace. This perspective reveals how internationally brokered peace agreements, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), become enveloped and reinterpreted within pre-existing logics of militarised patronage, communal identity, and customary reconciliation. Consequently, the framework provides critical practical insights, suggesting that effective engagement requires moving beyond the mere inclusion of 'traditional' actors as stakeholders. It demands a deeper understanding of how their authority is constituted and how it interacts with, and often subverts, formal legal and political institutions. Sustainable interventions must therefore be based on sophisticated political analysis of these hybrid interactions, rather than on imported institutional templates. Nevertheless, the proposed framework is not without limitations. As a primarily theoretical construct, its

analytical power must be rigorously tested and refined through sustained empirical research. Future studies should employ the HPO lens to conduct granular, ethnographic examinations of specific peacebuilding interfaces—for instance, in the detailed workings of hybrid justice mechanisms, the local governance of security in ceasefire areas, or the distribution of resources within transitional power-sharing arrangements. Furthermore, the framework’s emphasis on domestic hybridity must be carefully balanced with an analysis of the agential role of international actors themselves, who are active participants in the hybrid order, not external to it. Research should therefore investigate how the strategies, funding, and political conditioning of multilateral bodies, donor nations, and NGOs actively shape and are shaped by local hybrid logics. Acknowledging these limitations is not a weakness but a necessary step in developing more nuanced, evidence-based approaches to peacebuilding. This underscores a broader imperative for African Peace Studies: the critical need for theory that is grounded in the historical and sociological specificities of the continent’s diverse political landscapes. The experience of South Sudan powerfully demonstrates that models derived from Western historical experiences and philosophical traditions are often ill-suited to contexts where statehood, sovereignty, and legitimacy are constituted differently. Scholars and practitioners must therefore commit to building theory from the ground up, privileging African voices, experiences, and epistemologies. This entails moving beyond critique towards the constructive development of analytical tools, like the HPO framework, that take hybridity, pluralism, and colonial legacy as their starting points, not as inconvenient aberrations.

In final reflection, the implications for fostering a sustainable peace in South Sudan are profound. A hybrid political order analysis suggests that a viable future for the country will not be found in the eventual triumph of a Weberian state over ‘traditional’ or ‘informal’ spheres. Rather, it lies in the deliberate, careful, and politically astute negotiation of a legitimate and accountable hybrid order. This requires peacebuilders to engage with the real, existing sources of authority and conflict management, however uncomfortable or illiberal they may appear, and to foster connections between them that enhance public accountability and inclusive citizenship. The goal is not to fossilise difference but to forge a pragmatic social contract that reflects the complex tapestry of South Sudanese society. Ultimately, recognising South Sudan as a Hybrid Political Order is to acknowledge its profound complexity and agency. It is to understand that the path to peace, however long and fraught,

Contributions

This article makes a significant theoretical contribution by proposing an integrated framework that synthesises critical African political thought with contemporary conflict transformation models. It moves beyond conventional state-centric analyses to foreground the agency of local peace architectures and customary institutions. By applying this framework to developments between 2021 and 2024, the study provides a novel lens for understanding the complex interplay of elite bargains and grassroots reconciliation in South Sudan. Consequently, it offers scholars and practitioners a more nuanced tool for analysing the non-linear trajectories of peacebuilding in post-colonial African states.