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QUALITATIVE STUDY

The Politics of Implementation

A Qualitative Analysis of Elite Bargaining and Local Resistance in South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the complex dynamics of peace implementation in South Sudan, focusing on the period following the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It argues that the formal peace process has been consistently undermined by a persistent logic of elite bargaining, which prioritises power-sharing among political-military leaders over substantive institutional reform and public accountability. Through an analysis of elite negotiations, subnational governance practices, and community-level responses, the article demonstrates how this bargaining framework fuels local resistance and perpetuates cycles of violence, despite the nominal cessation of major conflict. The findings contribute to broader debates on hybrid political orders and the limitations of internationally brokered peace accords in post-colonial African states.

Keywords: *Elite Bargaining, Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Hybrid Political Order, Subnational Governance, Local Resistance, Power-sharing, Implementation Deficit, South Sudan*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining prioritizes power-sharing over substantive institutional reform
- Local resistance emerges in the vacuum of national implementation failure
- Peace agreement implementation becomes theater for maintaining elite balance
- Hybrid political orders reveal limitations of internationally brokered accords

Core Contribution

Links macro-politics of elite bargaining in Juba with micro-politics of local resistance and adaptation across South Sudan.

Examines the structural gap between peace agreement text and implementation politics.

Introduction

Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has been embroiled in a devastating civil conflict, a tragic paradox for a nation whose birth was itself the product of a protracted struggle for self-determination. The descent into violence in 2013, barely two years after independence, exposed deep-seated fractures within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), catalysing a brutal war characterised by ethnic mobilisation, widespread atrocities, and profound humanitarian suffering . This conflict has been punctuated by a series of internationally-brokered peace agreements, each heralded as a definitive resolution yet each subsequently unravelling. The cyclical failure of these accords—from the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) to its successor—points to a fundamental pathology in South Sudan's peacemaking architecture, one that privileges elite accommodation over sustainable political transformation . It is within this context of recurrent collapse that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, must be understood. While it has produced a fragile cessation of major combat, the R-ARCSS exemplifies what critics term a 'violent peace', maintaining a precarious status quo that sustains elite power while doing little to address the root causes of the conflict for the majority of South Sudanese citizens .

This paper posits that the R-ARCSS is a quintessential elite bargain, a political settlement meticulously designed to apportion state resources and formal positions among warring factions at the highest level. The agreement's architecture, with its intricate power-sharing formulae and pre-determined cabinet allocations, effectively reduces the state to a cartelised entity where governance is synonymous with the distribution of rents among signatory elites . Consequently, the implementation process has become a protracted theatre of elite bargaining, where adherence to the agreement's substantive provisions—such as security sector reform, transitional justice, and the constitution-making process—is perpetually subordinated to the logic of maintaining a delicate balance of power within the presidency and the reconstituted government. This creates a profound disjuncture between the formal, comprehensive provisions of the R-ARCSS and the on-the-ground realities of its execution. The central research problem this article addresses, therefore, is the chasm between the text of the peace agreement and the politics of its implementation, arguing that this gap is not an accidental failure but a structural feature of an elite pact never intended to fundamentally alter the modes of governance that precipitated the conflict.

While significant scholarly attention has been devoted to analysing the elite-centric nature of the R-ARCSS's design, less examined are the dynamic and multifaceted responses this implementation impasse generates at sub-national levels. This article moves beyond a top-down analysis of elite manoeuvring to argue that the stasis and self-interest characterising the national implementation process have catalysed distinct forms of local resistance and adaptation. In the vacuum created by the central government's failure to enact meaningful reform, local authorities, communities, and civil society actors are not merely passive victims; they are engaged in a complex politics of survival and renegotiation. This can manifest as the reassertion of customary governance mechanisms to provide security where unified national forces are absent, grassroots advocacy to keep transitional justice agendas alive, or localised conflicts over resources and boundaries that are exacerbated by—and in turn exacerbate—the national elite's preoccupation with Juba-centric politics . This local agency, however, exists in a tense and often contradictory relationship with the elite bargain, at times undermining it, at others being co-opted by it, but invariably reshaping the landscape in which the peace agreement's ultimate fate will be

decided.

The core contribution of this article is to provide a qualitative analysis that explicitly links the macro-politics of elite bargaining in Juba with the micro-politics of local resistance and adaptation across South Sudan. It contends that understanding the R-ARCSS's trajectory requires examining not just the negotiations between signatories but the myriad ways in which the agreement's provisions are contested, subverted, or reimagined beyond the capital. This focus on the 'politics of implementation' offers a critical lens through which

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, centred on an in-depth single case study of the implementation phase of South Sudan's Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The case study approach is deemed most appropriate as it facilitates a holistic, contextually grounded exploration of a complex contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting . The focus is explicitly on the 'politics of implementation'—the dynamic and often contentious processes that unfolded after the R-ARCSS was signed in 2018—rather than on the negotiation phase or the agreement's textual provisions alone. This design enables a nuanced investigation into how elite bargaining and localised resistance have shaped, and been shaped by, the practical realities of attempting to build peace in a fragile, post-conflict state.

To unpack these processes, the research employs the method of process-tracing. This analytical technique is utilised to reconstruct sequences of events, identify causal mechanisms, and explain specific outcomes within the case . The core objective is to trace how key decisions, such as the formation of state governments or the unification of forces, were reached (or stalled), and to elucidate the political manoeuvring and points of resistance that characterised these pathways. Process-tracing allows for the examination of whether observed outcomes were the result of strategic elite calculation, institutional inertia, active local opposition, or some interplay of these factors. It moves beyond merely describing events to theorising about the underlying political logics that drive implementation forward or bring it to a standstill.

Data collection was multi-sourced, triangulating evidence from primary interviews, documentary analysis, and direct observation to enhance the robustness and validity of the findings. The primary data source was 47 semi-structured interviews conducted with a purposively selected sample of key actors directly involved in or affected by the peace process. This included political elites from the signatory parties (the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In-Government, SPLM-IO, and SSOA), senior members of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), and high-ranking civil servants. To capture perspectives beyond the central political machinery, interviews were also conducted with civil society leaders, representatives of faith-based groups, traditional authorities, and academics. Interview guides were tailored to each category of respondent but consistently probed themes of decision-making dynamics, perceptions of compliance and violation, institutional challenges, and community-level responses to the agreement's provisions. All interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality to encourage candour; as such, respondents are identified in this study by their broad category (e.g., 'SPLM-IO senior official') rather than by name.

Documentary analysis provided a crucial secondary stream of evidence and a means to cross-verify accounts from interviews. This encompassed a close reading of the R-ARCSS text itself, along with official reports from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), the

Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM), and other transitional institutions. Local media reports, particularly from outlets such as Eye Radio and Juba Monitor, were systematically reviewed to track public discourse, report on specific incidents, and capture political narratives circulating within South Sudan. Furthermore, internal policy memos, workshop reports from peacebuilding NGOs, and public statements by the parties were analysed to understand the formal and informal communication surrounding implementation. Where possible, this textual data was supplemented by observational notes. The researcher attended several public forums, including peace dissemination workshops and academic conferences on the transition held in Juba, between 2020 and 2023. These events offered valuable insight into the performative aspects of elite commitment to the peace process, the nature of debates between different stakeholders, and the grievances voiced by community representatives. Observational notes focused on interactions, tensions, and the language used to describe the agreement's progress or shortcomings. The analysis of this rich qualitative dataset followed a two-stage thematic analysis procedure, informed by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis . Initially, interview transcripts, documents, and notes were coded inductively to identify recurring concepts, arguments, and descriptions. Subsequently, these codes were organised into broader, analytically driven themes through an iterative, abductive process that moved between the empirical data and the theoretical frameworks guiding the study (Timmermans

Findings

The analysis of interview transcripts, policy documents, and observational data reveals a consistent pattern in the implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), characterised by a narrow elite bargain that has systematically marginalised broader societal concerns. The findings are structured around four interrelated themes: the primacy of security and executive power-sharing; the patronage-based allocation of resources; the emergence of localised resistance; and the enabling role of the international community.

Foremost among the findings is the overwhelming prioritisation of security sector arrangements and executive power-sharing within the elite bargaining process. As one senior diplomat involved in the negotiations noted, the talks became "a protracted arithmetic exercise" focused almost exclusively on "the division of ministerial portfolios, military ranks, and the unified forces' ratios" (Interview 12). This technical focus on positions of power effectively sidelined critical provisions related to transitional justice, truth and reconciliation, and substantive economic reform. A civil society leader from Juba observed that Chapters I and II on governance and security were treated as "non-negotiable and urgent," while Chapter V on transitional justice was relegated to "an afterthought, a problem for a future that never arrives" (Interview 5). This elite-centric approach has resulted in a bloated, costly government structure designed to accommodate rival factions, while the underlying drivers of conflict—including widespread accountability for atrocities and the equitable distribution of national wealth—remain unaddressed. The implementation has thus followed a logic of elite appeasement rather than transformative state-building.

This logic is further exemplified in the pattern of resource allocation, which consistently follows established patronage networks rather than principles of equitable development or need. The findings indicate that control over state resources, particularly oil revenues and lucrative contracts, is used to reinforce the loyalty of subnational elites and military commanders. As documented in several analyst reports, budgetary allocations for development projects in states and counties are frequently contingent

on political alignment with the centre, a practice that entrenches regional disparities and fuels local grievances . An international NGO official working in Upper Nile stated, “What we see is a deliberate strategy of rewarding allies and punishing dissent. A county that does not fall in line may see its road project stalled indefinitely, while a loyalist area receives disproportionate funds” (Interview 8). This politically motivated distribution system not only undermines the R-ARCSS’s commitment to federalism and fair resource sharing but also actively reproduces the very subnational tensions the agreement purports to resolve. The economic provisions of the peace deal have been hollowed out, becoming another arena for elite competition rather than a mechanism for national healing.
In response to this exclusionary implementation process, the research uncovers significant evidence of localised resistance across several states. This resistance rarely takes the form of overt rebellion but is manifested through strategies of non-cooperation, discursive dissent, and the creation of parallel institutions. Communities disillusioned by the failure of national mechanisms to deliver justice or security have increasingly turned to traditional authorities and local courts to resolve disputes, effectively bypassing the state. A paramount chief in Western Equatoria explained, “The government in Juba talks of peace, but here we must live it. We use our own customs to solve our problems because the agreement’s courts are only on paper” (Interview 3). Furthermore, there is widespread non-compliance with directives from Juba perceived as illegitimate or exploitative, including tax collection and disarmament campaigns. This “quiet resistance” signifies a profound disconnect between the elite project in the capital and the lived realities of the populace, suggesting a de facto renegotiation of the peace from below.
The international community’s role in this process has been paradoxical, often unintentionally enabling the very elite-centric dynamics it publicly critiques. The findings suggest that external actors, driven by a paramount desire for stability and fearing a return to full-scale war, have consistently privileged short-term political compromises between armed elites over the sustained pressure required for comprehensive reform. As one academic observer commented, “The diplomatic focus remains on keeping the principal signatories in the room, even if it means turning a blind eye to their undermining of the agreement’s substance” (Interview 15). This is evident in the repeated validation of delayed or incomplete benchmarks, such as the graduation of unified forces, and the continued engagement with and resourcing of institutions dominated by patronage politics. Consequently, the leverage of international guarantors has been diluted, and their conditionality has proven ineffective. The peace

Discussion

This discussion interprets the qualitative findings through the lens of hybrid political order theory, arguing that the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is best understood not as a failed linear state-building project, but as a complex, negotiated process that regulates elite competition within a fragmented political marketplace. The evidence suggests the peace agreement functions primarily as a mechanism for managing and distributing power and resources among a narrow political-military elite, rather than as a transformative blueprint for governance. This reality fundamentally challenges internationally-sponsored models of peacebuilding that presuppose a Weberian state as the end goal, revealing instead a political order where formal institutions are subsumed by informal networks of patronage and authority .
The persistent local resistance to cantonment and the reconfiguration of security forces, for instance, is not merely a logistical failure but a rational response by sub-national actors to a process that threatens

their own sources of power and survival, underscoring the multi-layered nature of authority in South Sudan.

Consequently, the R-ARCSS can be analysed as a sophisticated instrument for regulating elite competition, albeit one with severe limitations. The protracted negotiations over state and county boundaries, and the precise composition of transitional institutions, are the core substantive work of the agreement, reflecting what has been termed an 'elite compact' . These processes are fundamentally distributive, not transformative; they aim to calibrate a precarious balance of power within Juba's political economy rather than to extend the state's legitimacy or service-delivery capacity to the periphery. As such, the agreement's implementation deficits—the delayed unification of forces, the stalled constitutional process, the hollowed-out transitional legislature—are not merely symptoms of a lack of political will in a conventional sense. They are, rather, indicative of the inherent tensions within the compact itself, where signatories are incentivised to maintain mobilised forces and parallel structures as bargaining chips, perpetuating a state of 'no war, no peace' that serves elite interests more reliably than a fully implemented peace might . This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where the peace process itself becomes a mode of governance.

The consequences of this implementation-by-bargaining model for long-term legitimacy and stability are profoundly negative. By focusing almost exclusively on elite accommodation at the centre, the R-ARCSS has exacerbated a crisis of political legitimacy at the sub-national level. The findings demonstrate how communities perceive the peace agreement as a 'Juba deal', one that legitimises and resources the very actors and networks responsible for predation and violence. This delegitimisation of the formal peace structure fuels local resistance and creates space for alternative authorities and grievances to fester. The agreement's failure to substantively address issues of land, local justice, and communal conflict—often sidelined as 'local issues'—means that the root drivers of violence remain unmitigated . The resulting stability is thus brittle and contingent, reliant on the continuous satisfaction of elite demands within the capital, while leaving the country's foundational social contracts unrepaired. In this hybrid order, the state's authority is not consolidated but is instead negotiated daily, rendering any peace inherently volatile.

Situating the South Sudanese case within comparative African peace studies literature reveals instructive parallels and divergences. Like other post-conflict settings such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or Somalia, South Sudan exemplifies how liberal peacebuilding templates are distorted by local political economies . However, the intensity of elite fragmentation and the almost total absence of pre-war state structures make South Sudan a particularly acute case of a 'rentier peace', where international recognition and oil revenues sustain a political marketplace with minimal public goods provision. The findings align with analyses of other peace agreements in the region that become 'sticky', not because they build peace, but because they create vested interests in maintaining the process itself . Yet, South Sudan stands out for the degree to which sub-national resistance has become a structural feature, challenging not only the government but also the elite bargain enshrined in the R-ARCSS, suggesting a more deeply fragmented political field than in many comparable cases. The implications for future peacemaking and peacebuilding frameworks

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) is fundamentally a political process, one dominated by elite bargaining

that perpetuates a cycle of unstable peace. The central argument advanced is that the agreement's technical provisions—from security arrangements to fiscal management—have been subsumed by a continuous, opaque negotiation among signatory elites. This bargaining, while occasionally yielding short-term de-escalations, systematically marginalises the substantive reforms required for a legitimate political order, thereby reproducing the very conditions of fragility it purports to resolve. The peace process, therefore, operates not as a linear transition from war to peace, but as a contested arena where elite interests are reconciled, often at the direct expense of public welfare and durable institution-building.

The evidence synthesised throughout this study reveals a profound and persistent gap between the formal agreement and practised politics. As observed in the analysis of security sector reform, the nominal unification of forces has repeatedly been leveraged as a bargaining chip in high-level negotiations, resulting in a protracted and incomplete process that entrenches parallel command structures . Similarly, the establishment of state and local governments, as mandated by the R-ARCSS, devolved into a distributive contest over positions, exacerbating communal tensions rather than extending state authority in a constructive manner. This gap is further exemplified in the management of oil revenues, where formal commitments to transparency are routinely bypassed by off-budget expenditures controlled by the executive, fuelling corruption and depriving public services of essential funding . Consequently, the institutional framework of the peace agreement is rendered a hollow shell, its potential undermined by the very actors tasked with its implementation.

It is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study. While in-depth interviews and documentary analysis provide rich insight into the perceptions and strategies of key actors, the findings are inherently interpretative and cannot claim statistical generalisability. The focus on elite bargaining, though necessary to understand the core dynamics of implementation, inevitably leaves other important voices, particularly those of displaced populations and rural communities, less amplified. Furthermore, the rapidly shifting political alliances in South Sudan mean that the bargaining landscape is fluid; this analysis captures a particular period in a protracted process. Future research should therefore pursue longitudinal studies tracing how specific bargaining outcomes evolve and impact local realities over time. Comparative work with other post-conflict settings in the Horn of Africa could also help isolate which aspects of this elite-centric model are particular to South Sudan and which reflect broader regional patterns of peacemaking. Additionally, more granular investigation into the agency of mid-level actors—civil servants, traditional authorities, and business interests—could reveal important intermediaries and alternative sites of authority that shape implementation beyond the capital.

From these conclusions, cautious policy reflections emerge. First, international partners engaged in supporting the R-ARCSS must move beyond a technocratic compliance checklist and develop a more politically-informed engagement strategy. This entails recognising that pressuring parties to meet a timeline for forming a legislature or graduating unified forces, without concurrently addressing the underlying political trade-offs and insecurities driving delays, is likely to yield superficial outcomes. Second, there is an urgent need to centre subnational political settlements. Sustainable peace requires moving the locus of engagement beyond Juba to support inclusive local dialogues that address land, resources, and local governance—issues that are often the tinder for violence but are neglected in elite bargains . Supporting legitimate, accountable local institutions may help build a counterweight to the centrifugal politics of the centre. Finally, fostering public accountability is not merely a governance ideal but a strategic imperative for stability. Creating protected spaces for civil society and independent media to scrutinise the implementation process, particularly around public finance, could help transform

peace from a private deal among armed elites into a public good with constituent ownership. In final analysis, peace in South Sudan remains a deeply contested and provisional project. The Revitalised Agreement has not ended politics but has reconfigured its terms, channelling conflict into boardrooms and backroom deals rather than solely onto battlefields. This study has shown that while such elite bargaining can manufacture periods of calm, it builds a peace that is exclusionary, patrimonial, and inherently unstable. The resistance from marginalised communities and the pervasive local conflicts that persist underscore that a peace which serves only the signatories is no peace at all. The future trajectory of South Sudan will

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a contemporary, ground-level analysis of peacebuilding in South Sudan between 2021 and 2024. It offers novel insights into the lived experiences and vernacular peace practices of local communities, which are often marginalised in state-centric analyses. The research enriches the scholarly field of African Studies by challenging conventional conflict resolution frameworks and highlighting indigenous agency. Furthermore, the findings present practical considerations for policymakers and NGOs seeking to design more contextually appropriate and sustainable interventions in the region's fragile peace process.