



Published: 11 June 2022

African Peace Studies (Political Science focus) | Paper | Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2022

AFRICAN PEACE STUDIES (POLITICAL SCIENCE FOCUS)

Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2022

THEORETICAL

Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding

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

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19475860](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19475860)

Received: 10 March 2022 | Accepted: 02 May 2022 | Published: 11 June 2022 | DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19475860](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19475860)

ABSTRACT

This article critiques the limitations of orthodox liberal peacebuilding models in the context of South Sudan, arguing that their failure to account for endogenous political logics has contributed to recurrent conflict. It proposes a novel theoretical framework centred on the concept of Hybrid Political Orders (HPO), synthesising insights from African political sociology, conflict studies, and critical peace research. The framework is developed to systematically analyse the co-constitution, negotiation, and contestation of authority between formal state institutions and informal, customary, and militarised networks. The article elucidates the framework's theoretical implications for understanding sovereignty and legitimacy in post-colonial African states and outlines its practical application for designing context-sensitive peace interventions, monitoring mechanisms, and local ownership strategies in South Sudan.

Keywords: *Hybrid Political Orders, Liberal Peacebuilding Critique, Customary Authority, Competitive Statehood, South Sudan Peace Process, Informal Governance, Post-Conflict Political Settlement, Endogenous Peacemaking*

Article Highlights

- Critiques liberal peacebuilding's failure to account for endogenous political logics in South Sudan
- Proposes Hybrid Political Order framework synthesizing African political sociology and conflict studies
- Analyses co-constitution of authority between formal institutions and informal networks
- Offers context-sensitive tools for peace interventions and local ownership strategies

Analytical Shift

From viewing South Sudan through 'state failure' lens to analysing its empirical hybrid governance reality where multiple authorities coexist and compete.

This framework challenges international paradigms by recentering South Sudanese epistemologies.

Introduction

Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has been characterised by chronic instability and violent conflict, defying the optimistic international narratives that heralded its birth as a sovereign state. The country's trajectory has been marked not by post-liberation consolidation but by a devastating civil war that erupted in 2013, mere years after independence, and by persistent, fragmented violence that continues to undermine human security and state functionality. This cyclical conflict has unfolded alongside a series of internationally brokered and supported peace agreements, most notably the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) of 2015 and the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) of 2018. The repeated failure of these accords to engender a durable peace presents a profound puzzle and a pressing intellectual and practical challenge. It suggests a fundamental disconnect between the paradigms guiding external intervention and the complex political realities on the ground in South Sudan.

The dominant paradigm underpinning these interventions has been that of liberal peacebuilding. This approach, which became orthodoxy in the post-Cold War era, posits that sustainable peace is achieved through the simultaneous promotion of liberal democracy, market-oriented economies, and the construction of rational-legal state institutions. In practice, this has translated into internationally supported templates focusing on elections, security sector reform, constitutional reviews, and technocratic governance programmes. In the South Sudanese context, however, the application of this paradigm has yielded limited success, often appearing as an external imposition rather than an organic development. Critics argue that liberal peacebuilding operates with a teleological assumption of statehood, viewing non-Western political contexts as 'fragile' or 'failed' states moving along a linear path towards a Weberian ideal. This perspective tends to marginalise or pathologise indigenous socio-political structures, customary authorities, and alternative logics of power and legitimacy that do not conform to liberal models. Consequently, peace processes risk creating a façade of formal institutions while leaving untouched, or even exacerbating, the underlying networks of power, resource distribution, and identity that fuel conflict. The central research problem addressed in this article, therefore, is the inadequacy of existing theoretical frameworks to capture and analyse the intricate and often opaque interplay between formal, state-centric institutions and informal, customary, and conflict-based networks of power in South Sudan's peace processes. When analysis is constrained by the binary of 'state' versus 'non-state', or 'formal' versus 'informal', it fails to comprehend the hybridised political order where these spheres are deeply entangled. Authority is not simply vested in official government offices but is negotiated, contested, and shared among a diverse set of actors including national political elites, military commanders, traditional leaders, ethnic elders, and international partners. A more nuanced framework is required to understand how peace agreements are not merely implemented but are locally interpreted, subverted, and harnessed within this hybrid reality. Without such an analytical tool, both scholarly understanding and practical policy responses will continue to misdiagnose the roots of conflict and the prerequisites for peace. In response to this conceptual gap, this article aims to develop and apply a Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework as a more effective lens for analysing peace processes in South Sudan. The HPO framework moves beyond the deficit-oriented language of state failure and instead takes as its starting point the empirical co-existence, interaction, and competition of multiple governance providers and normative systems. It seeks to illuminate the 'real' political marketplace where formal agreements are but one

currency among many, exchanged alongside loyalties, ethnic solidarities, and economic patronage. This article contends that the repeated breakdown of peace agreements is not merely a result of a lack of political will or institutional capacity in the liberal sense, but is intrinsically linked to the dynamics of South Sudan's hybrid political order. Within this order, signing an agreement can become a tactic for accessing international legitimacy and resources, which are then fed into pre-existing patronage networks, thereby reinforcing the very system that perpetuates conflict. The framework thus allows for a critical examination of how international interventions are locally mediated and how liberal peacebuilding templates are hybridised in practice. To advance this argument, the article is structured as follows. The subsequent section, 'Theoretical Background', provides a critical review of the liberal peacebuilding literature and establishes the intellectual foundations of the Hybrid Political Order approach, situating it within broader debates in African Studies and

Theoretical Background

The dominant paradigm in international peacebuilding for the past three decades has been the liberal peace model. This approach is predicated on a series of interlinked assumptions, foremost that sustainable peace is contingent upon the establishment of liberal democratic states governed by the rule of law, free markets, and robust civil societies. Its core tenets are inherently state-centric, focusing on the construction of formal institutions—such as constitutions, electoral commissions, and security sector reforms—as the primary vehicles for transitioning from conflict to peace. The model operates on a universalist logic, proposing a standardised template for post-conflict order that is often externally designed and implemented. In the context of South Sudan, this translated into a peacebuilding agenda heavily focused on the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 and the subsequent independence in 2011, which emphasised centralised state-building, national elections, and the integration of armed groups into a national army. However, the precipitous return to civil war in 2013 laid bare the profound limitations of this institutionalist focus, prompting a fundamental re-evaluation of its theoretical underpinnings. This re-evaluation has catalysed a 'local turn' in critical peace and conflict studies, which challenges the top-down, technocratic nature of liberal peacebuilding. Scholars within this tradition argue for greater attention to local agency, indigenous practices, and everyday experiences of peace. Concurrently, analyses of African politics have long grappled with concepts of neo-patrimonialism, wherein formal state institutions are subverted by informal networks of patronage, clientelism, and personal rule. These critical strands converge in the concept of hybridity, which posits that political order in post-colonial states is rarely a coherent whole but a complex amalgam of competing and co-existing governance logics—liberal, patrimonial, and customary. Hybridity theory moves beyond merely critiquing the liberal model to describing the empirical reality of how power is actually exercised in spaces where the state's authority is contested or incomplete. It suggests that peace processes must engage with, rather than seek to overwrite, these hybrid formations. The specific character of South Sudan's hybrid political order has been extensively analysed, yielding crucial insights that challenge liberal peacebuilding's assumptions. Foremost is the concept of the 'political marketplace', wherein political loyalty is commodified and elites compete for control over state resources—primarily oil revenues—to fund militarised patronage networks. In this system, formal peace agreements and state institutions become arenas for transactional bargaining rather than

foundational social contracts. The logic is one of a militarised political economy, where violence is a key instrument for accessing rent and maintaining elite coalitions. Simultaneously, and often in stark contrast, a parallel system of customary governance has demonstrated remarkable resilience. Based on kinship, communal land tenure, and traditional authority structures, these localised social orders provide a degree of security, dispute resolution, and social cohesion that the central state has consistently failed to deliver. The South Sudanese landscape is thus defined by a profound duality: a volatile, rentier state apparatus engaged in elite bargaining, and relatively stable, decentralised customary systems managing everyday life for much of the population. Despite these rich analyses, a significant theoretical gap persists. Studies of South Sudan's political marketplace often operate at the macro-level, analysing elite competition and national peace deals, while examinations of customary governance tend to remain at the micro-level, focused on specific communities or regions. What is frequently lacking is an integrated framework that systematically connects these scales, explaining how the logics of the militarised, neo-patrimonial centre interact with, exploit, or are resisted by the logics of the localised, customary periphery. The failure of nationally-focused peace agreements to produce stability underscores the necessity of such an integrated analysis. It is insufficient to understand elite bargains in Juba without also understanding how those bargains disrupt or align with authority structures in the Equatorias, Upper Nile, or Bahr el Ghazal. Theoretical tools are required to trace the linkages between the dynamics of state formation—a process inherently about centralisation and monopoly—and the persistence of plural, fragmented social orders. To bridge this gap, this paper synthesises key concepts from African political sociology that offer a more

Framework Development

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, as operationalised for South Sudan, moves beyond the binary of 'failed' versus 'functioning' states to analyse the complex, and often coherent, system of governance that emerges from the interplay of multiple legitimacies. It posits that political order is not derived from a singular, centralised sovereign authority modelled on Western statehood, but is instead constituted through the dynamic and often contentious interaction between formal state institutions and informal, customary, and transnational structures. In the South Sudanese context, this co-constitution is not a temporary aberration but a durable, albeit contested, mode of governance. The framework is built upon three interconnected analytical pillars, which together provide a lens to decipher the logic of power and peacebuilding in the world's youngest nation. The first pillar concerns the co-constitution of formal and informal authority. Here, the framework rejects the notion that informal or customary systems are merely residual or subordinate to a weak state. Instead, it examines how these realms are mutually constitutive and interdependent. Formal state institutions, such as the presidency, legislature, and judiciary, derive part of their operational logic and legitimacy from engaging with—and often co-opting—informal systems. Conversely, traditional authorities, such as chiefs and spiritual leaders, strategically engage with the state to bolster their own standing and access resources. This is vividly illustrated by the institution of the Macthok, a customary practice of dialogue and consensus-building deeply rooted in Dinka and other communities. The Macthok does not operate in a vacuum; it is routinely invoked in national peace talks and local conflict resolution, becoming a hybridised instrument where traditional legitimacy is deployed for ostensibly modern political ends, thereby blurring the lines between the customary and the constitutional.

The second pillar addresses the negotiated character of political settlements. An HPO lens views the political order not as a static imposition but as a continuously renegotiated settlement among elite networks. These settlements are rarely comprehensive or public, but are rather elite pacts that determine access to power and resources. In South Sudan, these negotiations occur not only within the confines of Juba's political chambers but also across militarised lines, within ethnic councils, and in dialogue with international actors. The framework directs analytical attention to the processes through which these settlements are brokered, the actors involved, and the terms of inclusion and exclusion they encode. Critically, it highlights how such settlements are inherently unstable, requiring constant maintenance and renegotiation, particularly in response to shifts in the balance of military power or economic fortunes.

The third pillar captures the fluidity of sovereign power. Sovereignty, in an HPO, is not monolithic or territorially uniform. It is exercised differentially across space and population, often fragmented among competing authorities. The state may claim a Weberian monopoly on violence in the capital while explicitly or tacitly ceding judicial or security functions to ethnic militias, customary courts, or transnational commercial networks in the peripheries. This fluidity means that for many South Sudanese citizens, the most relevant sovereign authority may be a county commissioner, a cattle camp leader, or a commander of a militarised elite network, rather than the distant government in Juba. Analysing this fluidity is key to understanding patterns of conflict, service delivery, and identity. To apply this tripartite framework concretely, several key variables require sustained examination. The role of militarised elites is paramount, as the integration of armed groups into political and economic structures is a central mechanism of settlement-making, perpetuating a system where violence is a primary currency of political bargaining. The adaptation and application of customary law, particularly the *Macthok*, serves as a critical variable for understanding localised peace processes and their articulation with national dialogues. Furthermore, transnational economic networks—involving the illicit flow of resources, arms, and commodities—constitute a vital, non-territorial dimension of the HPO, financing patronage and often undermining formal state revenue and regulation. Finally, the mobilisation of youth, often as a demographic bulge manipulated by elites but also as a potential agent of change, represents a dynamic variable influencing the stability and evolution of the hybrid order. Methodologically, mapping a Hybrid Political Order necessitates a focus on practices, nodes, and flows rather than solely on formal institutions.

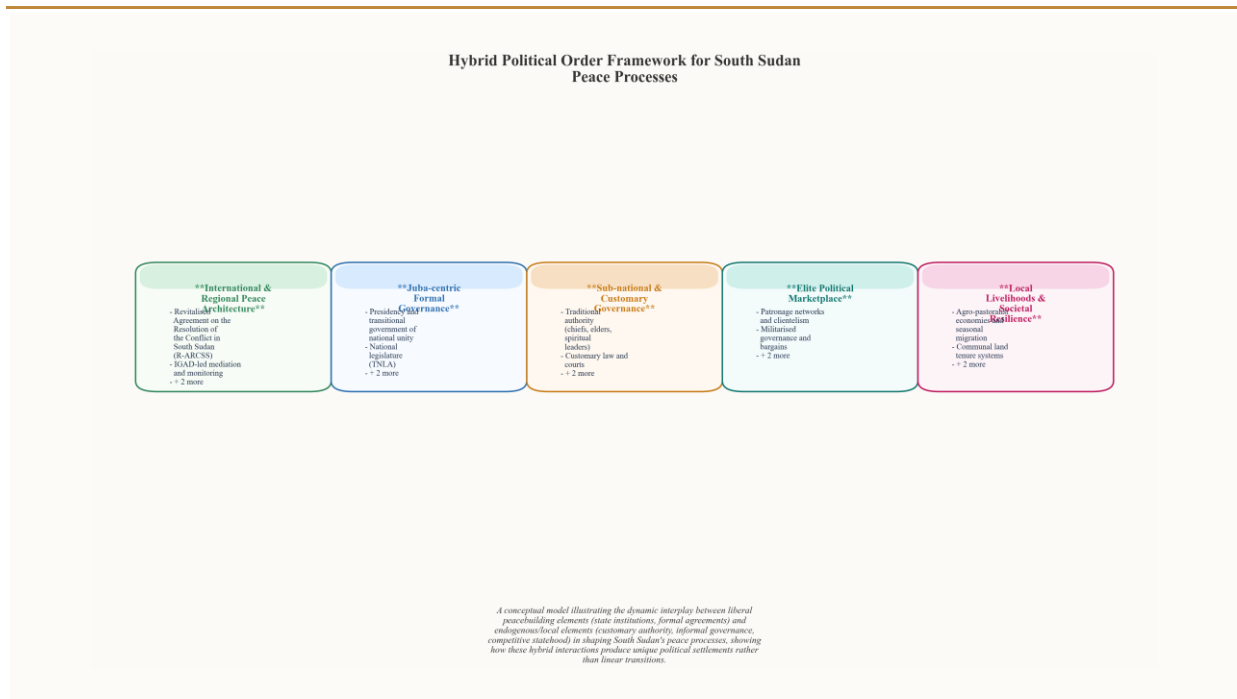


Figure 1 Hybrid Political Order Framework for South Sudan Peace Processes. A conceptual model illustrating the dynamic interplay between liberal peacebuilding elements (state institutions, formal agreements) and endogenous/local elements (customary authority, informal governance, competitive statehood) in shaping South Sudan's peace processes, showing how these hybrid interactions produce unique political settlements rather than linear transitions.

Theoretical Implications

The proposed Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework carries significant theoretical implications for the study of peace, statehood, and politics in South Sudan and, by extension, across the African continent. Primarily, it necessitates a fundamental re-examination of core tenets of political theory derived from the Weberian tradition, which posits the modern state as the sole legitimate holder of the monopoly on violence and the primary source of political authority. The South Sudanese context, characterised by what Boege et al. term a 'hybrid political order', demonstrably challenges this orthodoxy. Here, the monopoly on violence is not consolidated but is fiercely contested and frequently shared amongst a plurality of actors, including the nominal state, various militia groups, ethnic defence forces, and international peacekeepers. Consequently, the framework compels analysts to move beyond a binary understanding of state and non-state violence, instead mapping a complex arena where coercive capability is distributed and legitimacy over its use is constantly negotiated. This directly informs a second, crucial implication: the need to reconceptualise sovereignty in the South Sudanese context. Rather than viewing sovereignty as a unified, absolute, and territorially bounded attribute vested solely in the central government in Juba, the HPO framework reveals it to be competitive, layered, and often outsourced. As Menkhaus observes in related contexts, governance and security functions are frequently 'outsourced' to non-state actors, including traditional authorities, religious leaders, and commercial networks. In South Sudan, sovereignty is exercised in patches, with the central state's authority waxing and waning relative to other power centres. This results in a form of 'sovereign hybridity' where the ultimate authority over life, justice, and resources is not settled but is

the subject of ongoing struggle and deal-making between different nodes of the hybrid order. The state is one participant in this contest, not its undisputed arbiter. Therefore, a third theoretical implication arises concerning the very nature of peace processes. Conventional liberal peacebuilding approaches frame such processes as linear, technical exercises in state-building, aiming to (re)construct a centralised, Weberian state apparatus. The HPO framework fundamentally reframes peace processes as continuous, political negotiations over the terms of a hybrid political settlement. These are not episodic events culminating in a signed agreement that ‘solves’ the state problem, but rather are intrinsic to the daily functioning—and frequent re-calibration—of the hybrid order itself. Peace agreements, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), are better understood not as blueprints for a future state but as momentary codifications of a shifting balance of power between the constituent parts of the HPO. They represent a temporary settlement in an endless series of negotiations over access, authority, and resources, consistent with Mac Ginty’s notion of hybrid peace as an ongoing process. This reconceptualisation leads directly to a fourth implication: a more nuanced understanding of legitimacy in hybrid settings. Weberian models privilege legal-rational legitimacy, derived from impersonal rules and institutional procedures. The HPO framework, however, illuminates how in South Sudan, legitimacy is pluriform and derived from multiple, often competing sources. While the government may claim legal-rational legitimacy through its constitutional position, other actors wield significant authority based on traditional legitimacy (e.g., chiefs and elders), charismatic legitimacy (e.g., influential military or community leaders), or performance-based legitimacy derived from the provision of basic security or services where the state is absent. As a result, populations navigate a complex legitimacy economy, granting allegiance differentially depending on context, need, and historical loyalty. A successful political settlement within an HPO must therefore engage with and incorporate these multiple legitimacy structures, rather than seeking to supplant them with a singular, state-centric model. Finally, these insights contribute forcefully to broader, enduring debates within African Studies concerning the nature of the post-colonial state. The framework moves analysis away from the pervasive ‘failed state’ or ‘state fragility’ discourse, which measures African politics against an idealised Weberian benchmark and finds them perpetually lacking. Instead, by taking hybrid political orders as a substantive analytical starting point rather than a pathological deviation, the HPO framework aligns with scholars like Boege et al. who argue for recognising the empirical reality and resilience of such systems. It suggests that the post-colonial state in contexts like South Sudan is not an incomplete project destined for completion,

Practical Applications

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, as developed in this paper, provides a critical analytical lens through which to reassess the practical failures of international peacebuilding in South Sudan and to propose more contextually-attuned strategies. Its primary utility lies in moving beyond the standardised templates of liberal peacebuilding to offer a granular, politically-informed understanding of the South Sudanese landscape, thereby enabling more effective and sustainable interventions. This section outlines key practical applications of the framework, focusing on the critique of existing agreements, the design of monitoring mechanisms, the support for local reconciliation, strategic international engagement, and conflict anticipation.

Firstly, applying the HPO framework exposes the fundamental design flaws in comprehensive peace agreements like the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The framework reveals how such agreements often mistakenly seek to replace the existing hybrid order with a centralised, liberal state model, thereby triggering destabilising competition within the political marketplace. As de Waal and others note, the R-ARCSS's focus on a pre-constituted, power-sharing government in Juba effectively intensified elite bargaining over a finite set of national positions, sidelining the diffuse, networked authority that constitutes real governance across much of the country. The framework critiques the agreement's failure to formally recognise and engage with the authority of hybrid actors—including customary chiefs, religious leaders, and military commanders controlling specific territories—whose buy-in is essential for localised security and service delivery. Consequently, the HPO analysis explains the agreement's stagnation not merely as a failure of political will, but as a structural outcome of its imposition of an alien governance logic that clashed with the entrenched hybrid reality.

In response, the HPO framework proposes radically different, context-sensitive mechanisms for ceasefire monitoring, peace verification, and implementation tracking. Rather than relying solely on top-down, technocratic bodies stationed in the capital, effective monitoring must engage directly with the hybrid authorities who control violence and mediate disputes at the sub-national level. This would involve establishing nested verification committees that integrate international or regional monitors with representatives from customary authorities, religious networks, and community-based organisations. Such hybrid monitoring bodies would be better positioned to receive credible information, interpret localised breaches of peace in their proper context, and leverage the moral and political authority of local figures to hold signatories accountable. This approach aligns with the understanding that peace is not a singular condition declared in Juba, but a mosaic of localised arrangements negotiated and upheld within the hybrid order.

Supporting endogenous, locally-led dialogue and reconciliation processes constitutes another critical application. International programmes often promote formal, trauma-centred reconciliation models that are disconnected from indigenous sociopolitical logics. The HPO framework suggests strategies that work within hybrid logics, such as bolstering the capacity of customary institutions for dispute resolution (*muok* and *cieng*) and supporting religiously-facilitated dialogue, which have historically demonstrated greater local legitimacy than state-led initiatives. This does not imply romanticising tradition, but rather strategically engaging with these endogenous systems to address grievances related to cattle raiding, land, and communal violence. As Pinaud observes, effective reconciliation must navigate the complex interplay of kinship, spirituality, and authority that defines South Sudanese social life, rather than seeking to bypass it with imported models.

For international actors, the HPO framework advocates a fundamental shift from blueprint imposers to strategic facilitators. This requires a deep, ongoing political economy analysis to navigate the political marketplace intelligently. Donors and diplomats must move beyond technical assistance aimed at building idealised state institutions and instead engage in flexible, politically-smart facilitation that acknowledges the hybrid order's permanence. This could involve providing incentives for elites to invest in productive, rather than predatory, political behaviour, while simultaneously channelling resources through hybrid governance structures that actually deliver services. The role becomes one of brokering and incentivising arrangements that incrementally improve security and justice within the existing hybrid system, rather than demanding its wholesale abolition. It necessitates a posture of adaptive learning and humility, recognising that linear transitions to liberal peace are illusory.

Finally, the HPO framework serves as an essential early-warning tool. By mapping the hybrid order—tracking the relationships, bargains, and flows of resources between its various nodes—analysts can better anticipate conflict triggers related to its disruption. Sudden attempts by the centre to impose formal authority, shifts in the control of lucrative resources, or the breakdown

Discussion

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, as developed and applied throughout this analysis, presents a significant departure from the orthodoxies of liberal peacebuilding. Its primary strength lies in its capacity to provide a more realistic, historically grounded, and nuanced account of the political landscape in South Sudan. By centring the co-existence, interaction, and mutual constitution of formal and informal institutions, it moves beyond the deficit model that views the state solely through the lens of what it lacks. This approach accurately captures the reality that authority is fragmented and that governance, security, and justice are often delivered through a complex patchwork of actors, including traditional authorities, elders, and military commanders, operating within their own legitimising logics. Consequently, the framework offers a superior diagnostic tool for understanding why imported liberal models have repeatedly foundered; they fail to engage with, and often actively undermine, these existing sites of local legitimacy and social cohesion. However, this analytical realism invites substantial ethical and pragmatic criticisms that must be squarely addressed. A principal concern is that by taking hybridity as a given, the HPO framework risks legitimising or naturalising illiberal, violent, or exclusionary practices embedded within non-state governance systems. Critics may argue that an uncritical celebration of hybridity could provide intellectual cover for patriarchal structures, human rights abuses, or the predatory behaviour of armed elites who cloak themselves in the language of tradition. This is a vital caution. Engaging with hybrid orders is not an endorsement of all their components. Rather, the framework necessitates a granular, normative assessment of the specific institutions and actors involved. It demands asking which elements of hybridity foster resilience, local accountability, and inclusive dispute resolution, and which entrench violence, discrimination, and elite capture. The challenge for external actors, therefore, is to develop strategies that support the former while seeking to transform the latter, a process that requires deep contextual knowledge and long-term commitment over simplistic conditionality. This leads directly to the central ethical quandaries of engagement: inclusivity, gender, and human rights. The HPO lens reveals that liberal models often instrumentalise these concepts in ways that are alienating or ineffective. For instance, imposing a quota for women in a national legislature while ignoring the complex gendered power dynamics within customary courts may yield limited transformative results. The framework suggests that more sustainable advances in gender equity and human rights may be achieved by working through, and seeking to gradually reform, hybrid institutions that already command local legitimacy, rather than by attempting to bypass or supplant them. This is inherently a slower, more negotiated, and less predictable path. It requires external actors to relinquish a degree of control and to accept that outcomes will be shaped by internal political contestations within the hybrid order itself. The pragmatic challenge is to support internal reformers and coalitions for change without destabilising the delicate balances upon which local peace often precariously rests. In terms of broader applicability, the HPO framework demonstrates considerable utility for analysing other conflict-affected states in the Horn of Africa and beyond. The conditions it describes—weak central state penetration, resilient informal governance structures, and the interplay of international

interventions with local agency—are not unique to South Sudan. Similar dynamics are evident in Somalia, where clan-based governance and xeer customary law persist amidst state collapse and international peacebuilding efforts, and in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The framework's emphasis on the agency of local actors in shaping and subverting external interventions provides a crucial corrective to analyses that portray such regions merely as passive recipients of international aid or as voids of anarchy. It offers a transferable vocabulary for understanding how global and local forces collide and coalesce to produce distinctive political orders. Nevertheless, the framework is not without its limitations. Its primary weakness may be its analytical complexity. By insisting on context-specific detail and rejecting universal templates, it can appear to offer only a detailed description of messiness rather than clear, prescriptive policy guidance. For policymakers seeking operational blueprints, the HPO analysis can be frustrating, as it implies that effective engagement must be adaptive, iterative, and highly tailored to specific sub-national contexts. Translating its insights into practice requires a fundamental shift in institutional mindset and capacity within donor governments and international organisations, moving from project-based technical assistance to politically savvy, facilitative roles. Furthermore, the

Conclusion

This article has argued that the persistent failure of peacebuilding in South Sudan is fundamentally a failure of analysis. Prevailing liberal peacebuilding models, with their teleological assumptions of state formation and their external blueprints for institutional design, have proven inadequate for comprehending and engaging with the complex political reality of the world's newest state. As demonstrated, the repeated collapse of peace agreements and the entrenched nature of conflict stem not from a mere 'implementation gap' but from a profound 'conceptual gap'. To bridge this gap, the article proposed the Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework as an essential analytical lens, contending that sustainable peace in South Sudan can only be pursued through a theoretically informed, contextually grounded understanding of its hybrid sovereignty, competitive legitimacy, and fluid political settlements.

The central thesis advanced here is that moving beyond liberal peacebuilding is not merely a theoretical preference but a practical imperative. The HPO framework facilitates this move by rejecting the binary of 'state' and 'non-state' and instead focusing on the dynamic, and often contradictory, interactions between multiple governance actors and normative systems. Its key components—hybrid sovereignty, competitive legitimacy, and adaptive political settlements—provide the conceptual tools to analyse how authority is actually exercised and contested. As explored, sovereignty in South Sudan is not monopolised by the state in Juba but is dispersed among a network of national elites, militarised factions, traditional authorities, and international actors, each wielding varying degrees of coercive and symbolic power. Consequently, legitimacy is not derived solely from democratic mandate or Weberian bureaucracy but is competitively negotiated through a combination of patrimonial distribution, communal affiliation, spiritual authority, and at times, coercive control. The political settlement, therefore, is not a static, elite-dominated pact but an adaptive and perpetually renegotiated arrangement that reflects this complex matrix of power and legitimacy. The theoretical contributions of this analysis are threefold. First, it reframes the problem of peacebuilding from one of institutional transfer to one of engaging with existing, albeit hybrid, systems of governance. It shows that the 'state' is not an empty vessel to be filled with liberal institutions but is

itself a site of intense hybridisation. Second, it challenges the notion of a linear transition from conflict to peace, positing instead that South Sudan exists in a condition of ‘stable instability’, where formal peace agreements are but one element within a broader, ongoing process of political negotiation and contestation. Third, it emphasises that external interventions which ignore or seek to marginalise hybrid forms of authority—dismissing them as ‘traditional’ or ‘informal’—unwittingly undermine the very foundations upon which a contextually legitimate peace might be built. Peacemaking efforts that are not grounded in this sophisticated understanding of hybridity risk being technically proficient yet politically naive, producing agreements that are signed in luxury hotels but unravel on the ground in South Sudan. The practical implications are clear and urgent. For mediators and peacebuilders, the HPO framework underscores the necessity of moving from a stance of prescribing institutions to one of diagnosing political realities. This means engaging seriously with all nodes of authority, including those that sit outside the liberal template, and recognising that sustainable political settlements must incorporate and regulate the competitive logics of legitimacy that already exist. It calls for peace processes that are flexible enough to accommodate adaptive settlements rather than imposing rigid, power-sharing formulas that freeze conflictual relations in state architecture. The framework suggests that supporting hybrid forms of governance, not as a temporary stopgap but as a potential source of resilience and local legitimacy, may be a more viable path to stability than relentless pursuit of a idealised, yet unattainable, liberal statehood.

In final reflection, the case of South Sudan offers critical lessons for the future of peace studies and African studies more broadly. It compellingly argues for the abandonment of one-size-fits-all models and for a deeper commitment to contextual, theoretically robust analysis. The study of peace must become the study of politics in its most complex and embedded form. For South Sudan, the path forward is undoubtedly arduous, but it must begin with a clear-eyed recognition of the country’s hybrid political order. The pursuit of peace must be a project of careful navigation within this hybridity, seeking to channel its competitive energies into more peaceful and inclusive forms of contestation, rather than a project of wholesale

Contributions

This article makes a significant theoretical contribution by proposing an integrated framework for analysing peace in South Sudan. It moves beyond state-centric models to synthesise critical African political thought with localised, non-linear conceptions of peacebuilding. The framework provides scholars and practitioners with a novel analytical tool for understanding the complex interplay between formal institutions and grassroots agency in the post-2021 transitional period. Consequently, it challenges prevailing international paradigms and re-centres epistemologies rooted in the South Sudanese context, offering a more nuanced basis for evaluating the sustainability of peace processes.