



Published: 19 October 2023

African Peace Studies (Political Science focus) | Paper | Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2023

AFRICAN PEACE STUDIES (POLITICAL SCIENCE FOCUS)

Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2023

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>)

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19475894](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19475894)

Received: 02 June 2023 | Accepted: 31 August 2023 | Published: 19 October 2023 | DOI:

[10.5281/zenodo.19475894](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19475894)

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 states, and its practical applications for designing context-sensitive peace interventions, monitoring hybrid governance, and fostering locally legitimate political settlements.

Keywords: *Hybrid Political Orders, Liberal Peacebuilding Critique, Customary Authority, Competitive Statehood, Political Settlements, South Sudan Conflict, Post-Colonial Sovereignty, Informal Governance*

Article Highlights

- Critiques liberal peacebuilding's failure to account for endogenous political logics in South Sudan
- Proposes Hybrid Political Order framework for analysing authority co-constitution
- Examines negotiation between formal institutions and informal/customary networks
- Offers context-sensitive analytical tool for scholars and practitioners

Framework Application

The HPO framework provides structured analysis of how peace processes are interpreted, appropriated, and subverted beyond elite bargaining in formal agreements.

This analysis treats hybridity not as an obstacle but as the essential landscape for viable peace negotiations.

Introduction

The quest for a durable peace in South Sudan remains one of the most intractable challenges in contemporary African affairs. Since gaining independence in 2011, the world's youngest nation has been ensnared in a devastating cycle of large-scale violence, fragile ceasefires, and collapsed political agreements, most notably the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) and the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). This persistent instability, characterised by recurring outbreaks of conflict at national and sub-national levels, has resulted in profound human suffering, massive displacement, and the repeated failure of state institutions. International actors, including the United Nations, regional bodies like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and a multitude of donor nations, have invested considerable diplomatic and material resources into peacebuilding efforts. Yet, these interventions have consistently yielded ephemeral calm rather than transformative peace, prompting urgent scholarly and policy reassessments of the prevailing approaches to conflict resolution in the country.

A central contention of this article is that the repeated shortcomings of peacebuilding in South Sudan are fundamentally linked to the application of a dominant, yet ill-fitting, liberal peacebuilding paradigm. This paradigm, as critiqued by scholars such as Richmond, promotes a universalist template for post-conflict reconstruction centred on the rapid establishment of liberal democratic institutions, market-oriented economies, and a centralised state monopoly on legitimate force. In the South Sudanese context, this has translated into peace processes overwhelmingly focused on elite power-sharing arrangements in the capital, Juba, alongside technical assistance for elections, security sector reform, and constitutional drafting. However, this externally conceived model operates in profound tension with the complex socio-political realities on the ground. As noted by Mac Ginty and Sanghera, liberal peacebuilding often disregards or attempts to marginalise indigenous political cultures, authority structures, and customary practices of governance and justice. Consequently, the liberal peace project in South Sudan has largely produced a 'virtual peace'—a façade of institutional compliance that masks the enduring power of alternative, locally rooted political orders and logics of conflict. The inadequacy of the liberal framework necessitates a theoretical shift towards analytical models that take these local realities as their starting point. This article argues that the Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, developed notably by Boege et al., provides a more potent lens for understanding the dynamics of peace and conflict in South Sudan. The HPO framework moves beyond the state-centric assumptions of liberal peacebuilding to analyse how political order is actually constituted through the everyday interaction and negotiation between a plurality of actors. This includes not only the formal state apparatus but also traditional authorities, community elders, religious leaders, civil society groups, and commercial networks. In hybrid political orders, legitimacy and authority are fragmented and contested, derived from a blend of modern, traditional, and charismatic sources. Applying this perspective to South Sudan allows for a more nuanced examination of how peace processes are interpreted, appropriated, resisted, or subverted at various levels of society, beyond the elite bargaining captured in formal peace agreements. Therefore, this article proposes that sustainable peace in South Sudan can only be conceptualised through the prism of hybridity. It posits that the cyclical failure of peace agreements stems from their inability to engage meaningfully with the country's deeply entrenched hybrid political order. Rather than viewing hybridity as an obstacle to be overcome by statebuilding, this analysis treats it as the

essential landscape within which any viable peace must be negotiated. The central argument is that a Hybrid Political Order framework reveals the limitations of top-down, liberal institutional blueprints and illuminates the potential pathways for more contextually grounded, and thus more resilient, peacebuilding. This involves recognising the agency and legitimacy of non-state actors, understanding the localised logics of conflict and reconciliation, and envisioning forms of governance that accommodate pluralism rather than seeking to suppress it in favour of a homogenised state model. To advance this argument, the article is structured as follows. The subsequent section, ‘Theoretical Background’, will elaborate the critique of liberal peacebuilding and establish the conceptual foundations of the Hybrid Political Order framework, situating it within broader debates in peace and conflict studies. The third section, ‘The Hybrid Political Landscape of South Sudan’, will apply this framework descriptively to analyse the key pillars of hybridity in the South Sudanese context

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 set of interconnected assumptions, centralising the construction of a Weberian rational-legal state as the prerequisite for sustainable peace. Its core prescriptions involve a standardised sequence: securing a ceasefire, followed by the establishment of democratic institutions, market-oriented economic reforms, and the promotion of human rights and civil society. The underlying teleology assumes a linear progression from conflict towards a consolidated liberal democracy, wherein the state holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and governs through impersonal, bureaucratic institutions. In this view, peace is synonymous with the successful transplantation and internalisation of these liberal institutional forms, a process often facilitated and underwritten by significant international intervention and conditionality. However, the application of this model in post-colonial African contexts, particularly in South Sudan, has yielded deeply problematic outcomes, prompting a robust critical scholarship. Critics argue that liberal peacebuilding often results in ‘institutional mimicry’, where the formal trappings of statehood are replicated—a constitution, a legislature, a judiciary—but remain hollow shells devoid of substantive function or local legitimacy. This creates a façade of statehood that masks the persistence of alternative systems of authority and power. The resultant ‘legitimacy deficit’ is profound; populations may engage with these imported institutions only instrumentally, while their primary political allegiances and conflict-resolution mechanisms remain rooted in other social orders. As Englebert and Tull observe, such externally-driven statebuilding projects frequently fail to transform the underlying political settlement, instead cementing the power of elites who adeptly perform compliance with international norms while operating according to a different logic. The peace that emerges is often a fragile, elite-centric arrangement, vulnerable to collapse when international attention wanes or when elite bargains fracture.

To understand why the liberal model stumbles, one must engage with foundational concepts from Africanist political theory that illuminate the actual functioning of power on the continent. The concept of ‘neopatrimonialism’ is pivotal here, describing a system where the formal institutions of the modern state are systematically subverted by informal networks of patronage, kinship, and personal rule. Authority is exercised not through impersonal bureaucracy but through the distribution of resources and favours to clients, blurring the distinction between public office and private gain. This is not merely corruption in a liberal sense, but a coherent, if volatile, system of governance. Closely related is the

recognition of ‘informal governance’, where the real rules of the political game are unwritten, dynamic, and often more consequential than constitutional statutes. Furthermore, the reality of ‘legal pluralism’ is inescapable in contexts like South Sudan, where statutory law coexists, competes, and intertwines with customary and religious legal systems, each with its own sources of legitimacy and spheres of influence. These concepts collectively challenge the liberal assumption of a uniform political space governed by a single sovereign authority, revealing instead a fragmented and layered landscape of power. Synthesising these critiques, a significant theoretical shift has occurred towards understanding post-conflict societies through the lens of ‘hybridity’. This perspective moves beyond the binary of ‘failed’ versus ‘successful’ states, rejecting the notion that liberal institutions are either fully present or entirely absent. Instead, it posits that political order is invariably produced through the ongoing and dynamic interaction—sometimes collaborative, sometimes conflictual—between introduced liberal institutions and indigenous, customary, or informal forms of governance. Hybrid political orders are characterised by a multiplicity of actors, including state officials, traditional authorities, religious leaders, and international agencies, all wielding different forms of legitimacy and authority. Peace processes, therefore, are not about imposing a pre-conceived institutional blueprint, but about navigating the complex interfaces where these various normative and institutional systems meet. The focus shifts from statebuilding as an end in itself to understanding the negotiated and contingent nature of political order that emerges from these interactions. This theoretical progression—from the prescriptions of liberal peacebuilding, through its critiques grounded in African realities, to the emergence of hybridity as an analytical lens—provides the necessary foundation for re-examining peace processes in South Sudan. The country’s political landscape is a quintessential example

Framework Development

The proposed Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework offers a tripartite analytical lens for deconstructing the complex architecture of power and authority in post-conflict states like South Sudan. It moves beyond binary state/non-state categorisations to posit three interdependent, yet distinct, spheres that collectively constitute the political order: the formal state apparatus, customary authority systems, and militarised/commercial networks. Each sphere operates according to its own logic, sources of legitimacy, and institutional practices, yet their interactions—characterised by co-option, competition, and coexistence—define the actual functioning of governance and the nature of sovereignty on the ground.

The first component, the formal state apparatus, encompasses the institutions established through peace agreements and constitutional processes, such as the presidency, legislature, judiciary, and civil service. In South Sudan, this sphere is heavily internationalised, deriving significant resources and legitimacy from donor support and recognition by the international community. However, its authority is often territorially limited, functionally weak, and perceived as distant or extractive by much of the population. Its logic is nominally bureaucratic and legal-rational, though in practice it is frequently subverted by the logics of the other spheres. The second component comprises customary authority systems, which are deeply embedded in South Sudanese societies. These include the institutions of traditional chiefs (bany bith), elders, spiritual leaders, and community courts. Their legitimacy stems from historical continuity, cultural and religious norms, and their role in managing local conflict, land tenure, and social welfare. Customary systems

exhibit significant internal diversity across ethnic groups but share a logic of consensus-building and restorative justice. They often represent the most accessible and legitimate form of governance for rural communities, providing a degree of order and predictability where the state is absent or predatory. The third, and most volatile, component is the sphere of militarised/commercial networks. This encompasses armed groups (both state and non-state), their political wings, and the interconnected business elites whose wealth accumulation is tied to conflict economies, control of natural resources, and transnational smuggling. These networks operate through a logic of violence and patronage, establishing control over populations and territories to secure economic rents. They are fluid, often forming and dissolving alliances based on expediency, and they wield significant coercive power that directly challenges both formal state sovereignty and customary dispute-resolution mechanisms. The critical analytical purchase of the HPO framework lies in its focus on the dynamic interactions between these three spheres. These interactions are not static but are processes of constant negotiation, manifesting primarily as co-option, competition, and coexistence. Co-option is frequently observed, whereby formal state actors incorporate traditional chiefs into local government structures to bolster their legitimacy, or where militarised networks co-opt state offices to gain access to official resources and legal cover for their activities. Conversely, the state may attempt to co-opt militia leaders through military integration deals, with varying degrees of success. Competition is equally prevalent, as seen when customary land allocation practices clash with state-led or commercially-driven land grabs, or when militia violence deliberately undermines state security institutions and traditional peace conferences. Finally, coexistence describes pragmatic arrangements where spheres operate in parallel, often with a tacit division of labour; for instance, communities may turn to customary courts for most disputes while reluctantly paying taxes to a distant state authority, or may rely on a local armed group for protection against cattle raiders, despite its opposition to the formal government. To apply this framework empirically in the South Sudanese context requires a methodological approach focused on mapping power and authority at the sub-national level. This involves ethnographic and political-economy analysis to trace how specific governance functions—such as dispute resolution, taxation, security provision, and resource allocation—are actually performed in a given locality. Researchers must identify which actors from which sphere(s) are involved, what sources of legitimacy they invoke, and what forms of interaction (co-option, competition, coexistence) dominate. This granular mapping reveals the *de facto* hybrid order, which often bears little resemblance to the *de jure* state institutions outlined in constitutions and peace agreements. The utility of this framework is particularly evident in explaining two core paradoxes of South Sudan's peacebuilding experience:

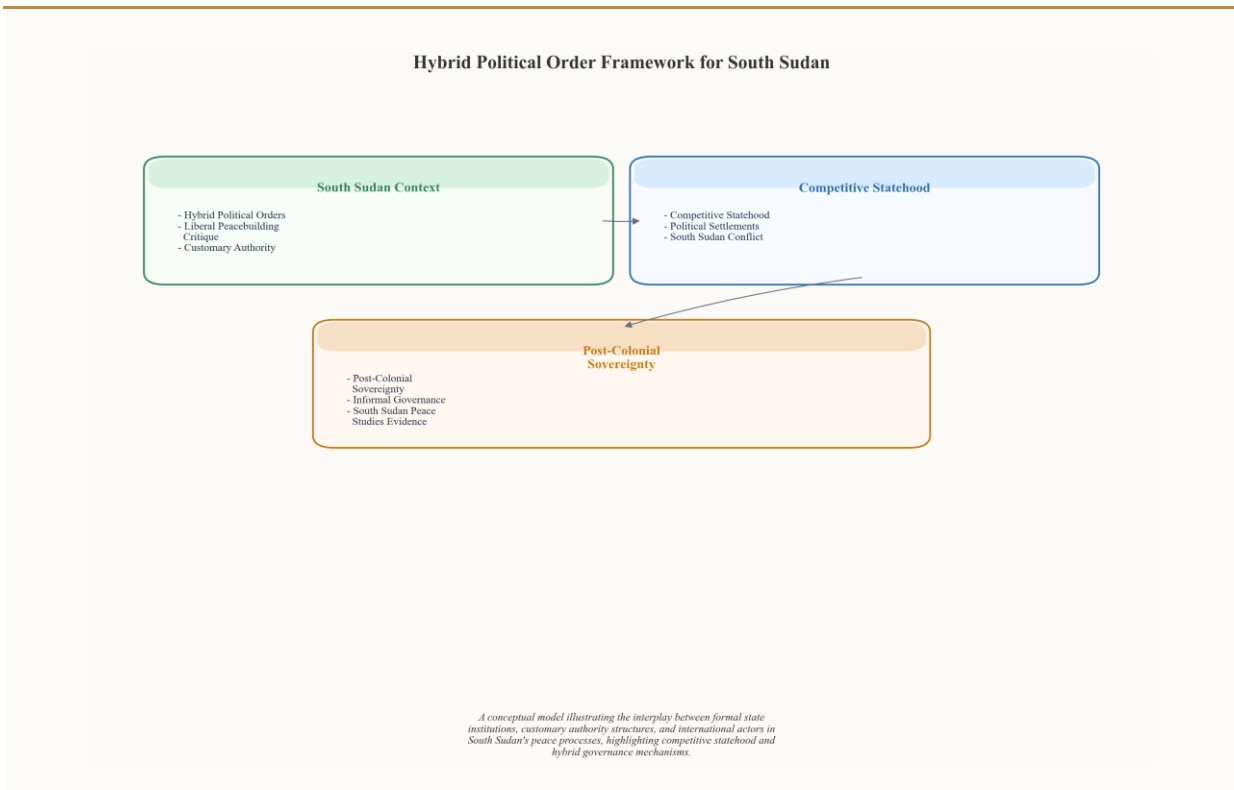


Figure 1 *Hybrid Political Order Framework for South Sudan. A conceptual model illustrating the interplay between formal state institutions, customary authority structures, and international actors in South Sudan's peace processes, highlighting competitive statehood and hybrid governance mechanisms.*

Theoretical Implications

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework developed in this paper carries significant theoretical implications, fundamentally challenging the ontological premises upon which much peacebuilding analysis rests. By applying this lens to South Sudan, it necessitates a re-conceptualisation of statehood itself, moving beyond the idealised Weberian model of a centralised, bureaucratic, and monopolistic entity. Instead, the framework posits the South Sudanese state as inherently competitive and ‘unbundled’. Sovereignty is not a singular, consolidated attribute held exclusively by the government in Juba but is rather dispersed across a constellation of actors, including traditional authorities, military elites, and international actors. This unbundling is not a temporary aberration or a sign of state failure in a linear sense, but a constitutive feature of the political order. The state apparatus becomes one competitor among others within a shared political space, vying for authority, resources, and legitimacy rather than standing above society as its sole governor. This perspective reframes what is often labelled as ‘collapsed’ or ‘fragile’ as a complex, if volatile, system of governance with its own logic of power distribution and negotiation. Consequently, a primary theoretical implication of this framework is its radical rethinking of political legitimacy. Liberal peacebuilding models typically assume legitimacy flows from a social contract between a citizenry and a state that delivers security and services through formal institutions. The HPO framework, in contrast, reveals legitimacy in South Sudan as polycentric and derived from multiple, often conflicting, sources. For many communities, legitimacy may be vested in customary law

administered by traditional leaders, spiritual authority, or the provision of security by a particular militia commander, rather than in distant and ineffective statutory institutions. The state's legitimacy is therefore partial and contingent, negotiated in a competitive marketplace where its claims are constantly measured against those of other authorities. This challenges the teleological assumption that legitimacy will naturally coalesce around a centralising state over time. Instead, it highlights how competing legitimacies can be a durable feature of the political landscape, with actors strategically navigating between different normative systems—state, customary, religious—depending on context and need. This analysis makes a substantial contribution to broader, enduring debates within African Studies concerning the nature of the post-colonial state. The HPO framework aligns with and extends a critical scholarly tradition that interrogates the imposition of Western state models onto African realities. It demonstrates that the 'hybrid' condition is not a transitional phase on a predetermined path to a liberal end-state, but a persistent structural characteristic shaped by historical processes of colonialism, violent state formation, and globalised intervention. The framework thus provides a robust analytical tool for moving beyond the 'failed state' paradigm, which carries normative baggage and offers little explanatory power for the actual governance that occurs in the absence of a strong central authority. By focusing on the de facto arrangements that emerge from the interaction of local, national, and international actors, it allows scholars to analyse the post-colonial African state on its own terms, as an arena of ongoing negotiation and competition rather than as a flawed imitation of an external ideal. Furthermore, the framework critically engages with the literature on international intervention and the limits of external modelling. It theoretically explicates why imported institutional blueprints, such as those embedded in the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), so often falter. The problem is not merely one of implementation or political will, but of a fundamental ontological mismatch. Liberal institutional models presuppose a unified sovereign authority capable of enacting and enforcing decisions—precisely the condition that is absent in an unbundled, competitive political order. When external actors attempt to 'shore up' state institutions without recognising or engaging with the other nodes of authority that constitute the actual HPO, they inadvertently fuel competition. They provide resources that become stakes in local power struggles, thereby reinforcing hybridity rather than transcending it. Theoretically, this implies that peacebuilding itself must be understood as a constituent element of the hybrid order, an external faction that becomes enmeshed in local political contests, rather than as a neutral, external solution. Finally, the HPO framework facilitates a crucial theoretical transition from a focus on static labels to an understanding of dynamic processes. It shifts the analytical emphasis from what the

Practical Applications

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework developed in this analysis moves beyond abstract theorisation to offer concrete, actionable insights for practitioners engaged in the arduous task of building peace in South Sudan. Its primary utility lies in providing a structured yet flexible lens for conflict analysis and process design that acknowledges, rather than bypasses, the country's entrenched political realities. By foregrounding the co-existence, interaction, and competition between the imported liberal state and indigenous socio-political systems, the framework equips analysts to map the complex landscape of power with greater accuracy. Crucially, it directs attention to the identification of key hybrid actors—those individuals and institutions that operate across and derive authority from both the formal and customary spheres. Understanding the interests, constituencies, and survival strategies of

these actors—whether they are government officials who are also clan elders, or SPLA commanders leveraging traditional loyalties—is fundamental to deciphering the logics of conflict and coalition-building that a purely state-centric analysis would miss. This analytical clarity directly informs the design of more legitimate and sustainable peace processes. A principal application of the HPO framework is to guide the formal recognition and strategic engagement of customary and local authorities within official negotiation and implementation architectures. Past agreements have often foundered by concentrating power and resources in a narrow, state-focused elite in Juba, thereby alienating sub-national authorities who wield *de facto* governance power and moral legitimacy. The framework suggests that peace accords should explicitly incorporate mechanisms for representing these authorities, not as peripheral stakeholders but as core guarantors of localised security and justice. This could involve, for instance, establishing formal councils of traditional leaders with advisory or oversight roles in resource management and dispute resolution at the state and county levels, thereby creating conduits between the centre and the periphery that are currently absent or dysfunctional.

Furthermore, the framework shifts the objective of external intervention from building a Weberian ideal-type state to monitoring and supporting constructive hybrid governance arrangements where they already function. Instead of seeking to replace or fully formalise customary systems, international actors should focus on mechanisms that mitigate their most exclusionary or violent aspects while bolstering their legitimate functions. This entails supporting iterative, context-specific dialogues between statutory and customary justice providers to develop complementary procedures, particularly around land disputes and gender-based violence, areas where statutory law and custom often clash. Similarly, in security provision, support could be channelled to locally-embedded hybrid arrangements—such as community policing initiatives that integrate police, former combatants, and clan leaders—that demonstrate effectiveness, rather than insisting on a monolithic national army and police force as the sole legitimate actors. The goal is to foster resilience and incremental improvement within existing hybrid orders, not to dismantle them in pursuit of an unattainable blueprint. This approach carries profound implications for international actors, requiring a fundamental shift from prescriptive, technical-assistance models to facilitative, politically-aware support. The HPO framework reveals the futility of ‘state-building as peacebuilding’ programmes that inadvertently fuel conflict by channelling resources through central state institutions that are themselves sites of violent competition. Instead, donors and diplomatic actors must adopt a posture of ‘principled pragmatism’. This involves moving beyond logframes focused on transparent budgets and reformed ministries to engage with the messy, informal politics of brokerage and negotiation that actually constitute governance in South Sudan. International support should be re-oriented towards creating spaces for negotiation among hybrid actors, funding locally-led peace infrastructures, and using leverage to incentivise elites to broaden inclusion rather than merely to sign agreements. It demands a long-term commitment to strengthening societal-level institutions and accountability mechanisms that can gradually temper the predatory tendencies of the central state. Ultimately, applying the HPO framework means accepting that peace in South Sudan will not emerge from a definitive victory of the state over non-state orders, nor from a perfect institutional design imported from abroad. It will be a negotiated, constantly evolving product of the interaction between these spheres. The practical task, therefore, is to cultivate an environment where these negotiations become less violent and more responsive to public needs. By providing a roadmap to identify key actors, design inclusive processes, support functional hybridity, and recalibrate international

engagement, this framework offers a more realistic and ethically grounded path forward. It acknowledges the agency of South Sudanese actors within their own complex political landscape and

Discussion

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework proposed in this analysis offers a significant departure from orthodox liberal peacebuilding, providing a more structurally accurate lens through which to view South Sudan's protracted peace processes. However, its application is not without conceptual and practical ambiguities, which warrant careful discussion. A primary critique that must be engaged is the potential for frameworks centred on hybridity to romanticise the 'local' or, conversely, to provide an apologia for illiberal governance. It is crucial to clarify that analysing the empirical reality of hybrid arrangements, where formal state institutions are deeply interwoven with informal authority structures, is not an endorsement of their outcomes. The framework does not posit that all hybrid forms are inherently legitimate or just; rather, it insists that any effective engagement must start from a clear-eyed understanding of this reality, rather than from a normative blueprint of what a state should be. The danger of providing a rationale for authoritarianism is mitigated by the framework's core emphasis on the negotiated and contested nature of hybrid orders. As demonstrated, power in South Sudan is not simply seized and centralised but is constantly brokered and legitimised through complex, often exclusionary, deals between national elites and sub-national authorities. The HPO lens makes these transactions visible, thereby creating analytical space to critique them on grounds of inclusivity and justice, rather than obscuring them behind a façade of non-functioning liberal institutions. In contrasting the HPO framework with other prominent theoretical approaches to African states, its distinctive value becomes clearer. The 'political marketplace' thesis, for instance, shares with the HPO model a focus on transactional politics and the commercialisation of authority. However, where the marketplace metaphor can risk presenting politics as a purely amoral economy of violence, reducing all actors to rational profit-maximisers, the HPO framework incorporates a richer sociological dimension. It accounts for the enduring salience of non-material sources of legitimacy, such as kinship, spiritual authority, and customary law, which continue to shape political behaviour beyond mere monetised transaction. Similarly, while 'resilience' theory usefully highlights the adaptive capacities of local societies in the face of state collapse, it can sometimes underplay the coercive and predatory aspects of hybrid arrangements. The HPO framework explicitly acknowledges that the resilience of certain social orders may come at the cost of human security for marginalised groups, thereby avoiding an uncritical celebration of local agency. It situates agency within structures of power, showing how both international models and local practices can be sources of oppression as well as resilience. The operationalisation of hybridity in practice presents formidable challenges, principally concerning the principles of inclusivity and transitional justice. As the analysis of power-sharing and security sector reform indicated, recognising hybridity can inadvertently entrench the positions of armed elites who command informal authority, at the expense of civil society, women, and youth. The technical inclusion of traditional authorities in peace processes, for example, may reinforce patriarchal norms and sideline more transformative agendas. Furthermore, a hybrid order that accommodates powerful actors responsible for atrocities poses a profound dilemma for justice. A purely pragmatic approach that legitimises these actors to achieve stability risks perpetuating a culture of impunity and embedding the very grievances that fuel conflict. Therefore, applying the HPO framework necessitates a critical, normative engagement: it must be used to design interventions that consciously navigate these trade-

offs, perhaps by broadening the scope of ‘hybrid’ to include a more diverse set of non-state actors, such as religious groups and women’s associations, and by integrating locally meaningful forms of accountability alongside formal judicial mechanisms. Despite these complexities, the framework’s paramount value lies in its capacity to provide a more grounded and realistic analysis of South Sudan’s political landscape. By rejecting the fiction of a blank slate upon which liberal institutions can be built, it forces analysts and practitioners to engage with the actually existing political order. This engagement reveals why imported models repeatedly fail: they misread the nature of the state, misunderstand the sources of legitimacy, and misidentify the key nodes of power. The HPO framework explains the stubborn persistence of certain patterns—such as the cyclical renegotiation of elite bargains, the localization of security, and the limited territorial reach of Juba—not as anomalies or failures of implementation, but as logical outcomes of a deeply entrenched hybrid system. It shifts the

Conclusion

This article has argued that the protracted and cyclical nature of conflict in South Sudan is a direct consequence of the fundamental mismatch between the assumptions of liberal peacebuilding and the complex political realities on the ground. The failure of successive peace agreements, from the CPA to the R-ARCSS, to foster a sustainable peace stems from their reliance on a state-building template that seeks to subsume, rather than engage with, the country’s extant and resilient forms of socio-political authority. In response, this paper has proposed the Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework not merely as an analytical lens but as an essential corrective for understanding and navigating peace processes in South Sudan. It posits that sustainable peace is only conceivable through a deliberate and strategic engagement with the hybridity that defines the South Sudanese political landscape, where state institutions, traditional authorities, and informal networks exist in a dynamic and often competitive co-constitution.

The central theoretical contribution of this analysis is to advance the HPO framework beyond a descriptive tool for diagnosing complexity, towards a prescriptive guide for pragmatic peacemaking. In the context of South Sudan, this means moving beyond the liberal preoccupation with constructing a Weberian state *de novo* and instead recognising the ‘negotiated state’ as the operative reality. The framework elucidates how power and legitimacy are dispersed across a spectrum of actors, from government elites in Juba to customary chiefs, spiritual leaders, and youth militias in the peripheries. Consequently, peacebuilding must be reconceptualised as a process of forging a viable *modus vivendi* among these competing nodes of authority, rather than the wholesale imposition of a foreign governance blueprint. This aligns with critiques of the standardised, one-size-fits-all model of peacebuilding, advocating instead for approaches that are fundamentally contextually-embedded. This reorientation carries significant implications for both peace studies and African political science. For peace studies, it underscores the imperative of moving ‘beyond liberal peacebuilding’ to develop theories that take hybridity as their starting point, not as an obstacle to be overcome. It challenges the field to develop methodologies capable of mapping the intricate, and often opaque, relationships between formal and informal institutions that collectively govern security, justice, and resource allocation. For African political science, the application of the HPO framework to South Sudan reinforces the necessity of analysing African states on their own terms, acknowledging their unique historical trajectories of state formation which rarely conform to Eurocentric models. South Sudan

exemplifies a ‘hybrid political order’ par excellence, where the legacy of pre-colonial societies, the destructive governance of the Turkiyya and Anglo-Egyptian condominium, and the militarised politics of the liberation struggle have coalesced into a distinct political system. Analysing it through this lens provides a more accurate and less normatively biased account of its political dynamics than frameworks that dismiss such hybridity as mere ‘state failure’ or ‘backwardness’. Therefore, the practical imperative arising from this theoretical discussion is clear: sustainable peace in South Sudan requires strategies that are endogenous and negotiated, not externally-imposed. This means peace processes must intentionally create platforms for the meaningful inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders beyond the signatory elites. Customary authorities, women’s groups, religious leaders, and cross-border community networks possess forms of legitimacy and conflict-resolution capacity that are often more effective at the local level than distant state courts or security forces. Future negotiations must institutionalise mechanisms for these actors to contribute to the design and implementation of agreements, particularly on issues of land, cattle, and local justice, which are frequent drivers of violence. The goal is not to romanticise traditional systems but to pragmatically harness their authority within a pluralistic governance settlement that reflects the hybrid reality. To translate this theoretical framework into actionable insight, several avenues for future empirical research are critical. First, detailed ethnographic case studies are needed to examine how hybrid governance actually functions in specific sub-national contexts within South Sudan, such as the Greater Upper Nile, Equatoria, or the Bahr el Ghazal regions. How do formal state provisions from the R-ARCSS, such as the cantonment of forces or the establishment of state legislatures, interact with existing local power structures? Second, comparative research applying the HPO framework to other post-conflict settings in the wider region, such as the Central African Republic, Somalia

Contributions

This article makes a significant contribution to the field of African peace and conflict studies by proposing an integrated theoretical framework for analysing South Sudan’s stalled peace processes. It moves beyond state-centric models to synthesise critical local agency, regional geopolitics, and the political marketplace, offering a more holistic lens for the period 2021–2023. The framework provides scholars and practitioners with a structured analytical tool to decipher the complex interplay of factors perpetuating conflict. Consequently, it enables a deeper, context-specific understanding essential for formulating more effective and sustainable interventions in South Sudan and similar protracted conflict settings.