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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 examines the protracted implementation of South Sudan's 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 subverted by a political economy of conflict, where elite bargaining prioritises power-sharing and resource allocation over transformative change. The analysis draws on document analysis and key informant interviews to trace how these elite-centric dynamics generate localised resistance and public disillusionment. The findings reveal a critical disconnect between national-level negotiations and grassroots security and justice imperatives, undermining the agreement's legitimacy and sustainability. The study concludes that without addressing this implementation gap and the underlying political marketplace, South Sudan's peace will remain fragile and contingent.

Keywords: *South Sudan, Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Elite Bargaining, Implementation Gap, Political Marketplace, Local Resistance, Power-sharing, Peacebuilding*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining prioritizes power-sharing over transformative peacebuilding
- Implementation deadlock fuels organised local resistance and disillusionment
- Critical disconnect between national negotiations and grassroots security imperatives
- Political economy of stasis preserves status quo while undermining agreement legitimacy

Policy Implications

Formal peace architectures must integrate indigenous conflict-resolution logics and address the political marketplace dynamics that subvert implementation.

This qualitative analysis reveals how elite capture of peace processes generates local resistance in South Sudan.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope was swiftly eclipsed by a devastating civil war that erupted in 2013. This conflict entrenched a brutal cycle of violence, mass displacement, and humanitarian catastrophe, fundamentally challenging the nascent nation's viability. In response, a series of internationally mediated peace agreements have been crafted, each aiming to halt the violence and forge a sustainable political settlement. From the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), which unravelled spectacularly, to its successor, the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), these documents have become a recurring feature of the political landscape. However, this pattern of agreement, collapse, and renegotiation points to a critical and under-examined problem: the persistent gap between the formal provisions of peace accords and their substantive implementation on the ground. This article argues that the faltering implementation of the R-ARCSS is not merely a technical or logistical failure, but a deeply political outcome. It is the product of deliberate elite bargaining and a calculated political economy of stasis, wherein the very process of 'implementing' peace has been captured by ruling elites to preserve a status quo that serves their interests, while generating significant local resistance.

The core research problem, therefore, centres on the mechanisms of this elite capture and the consequent dynamics of local resistance. The R-ARCSS, like its predecessor, establishes a complex architecture for governance, security, and transitional justice. Yet, its implementation has been characterised by protracted delays, selective application, and the consistent prioritisation of power-sharing amongst a narrow political-military elite in the capital, Juba. This phenomenon, often termed 'elite pact-making', has been extensively documented as a hallmark of South Sudan's peace processes . However, less understood are the precise political logics and everyday manoeuvres through which this capture of the implementation process is sustained, and how it actively manufactures a condition of perpetual transition. This article posits that for key signatories, the process of implementation—with its endless workshops, committees, and renegotiations—has become more valuable than its nominal end goal of sustainable peace. It functions as a resource-rich arena for distributing patronage, legitimising authority internationally, and managing intra-elite rivalries without ceding substantive power or altering the underlying, violent modes of accumulation.

This political economy of stasis generates profound consequences beyond Juba's power circles. The central argument advanced here is that the elite bargaining which produces implementation deadlock simultaneously fuels organised and everyday forms of local resistance. As national elites engage in protracted negotiations over ministerial portfolios and military ranks, the promised dividends of peace—security, basic services, reconciliation, and economic development—remain elusive for the majority of South Sudanese. This failure creates a legitimacy vacuum and fosters disillusionment. Consequently, resistance manifests in diverse ways, from the resurgence of community-level violence and the rejection of disarmament initiatives, to the discursive challenges posed by civil society and religious leaders against the peace process's exclusivity. This resistance is not merely a reaction to state absence, but a direct response to a peace model perceived as being orchestrated for and by a detached elite. Analysing this interplay between elite capture and local pushback is essential for moving beyond assessments of the R-ARCSS that focus solely on technical compliance, towards an understanding of its lived political realities.

To interrogate these dynamics, this study employs a qualitative methodological approach, drawing on

extensive fieldwork. It analyses the narratives, strategies, and rationales of actors engaged in the implementation machinery, as well as those experiencing its effects at the sub-national level. The methodology is designed to uncover the informal logics and political calculations that underpin formal processes, providing a granular analysis of how stasis is actively produced and contested. The article proceeds by first detailing this methodological framework, justifying the qualitative design and data collection strategies that enable this investigation. Subsequent sections will then analyse the architecture of the R-ARCSS as a site for elite bargaining, examining how key provisions on security, governance, and resources have been manipulated to sustain a profitable status quo. The article will then explore the multifaceted expressions of local resistance that this stasis provokes, arguing that such resistance constitutes a significant, though often fragmented, political

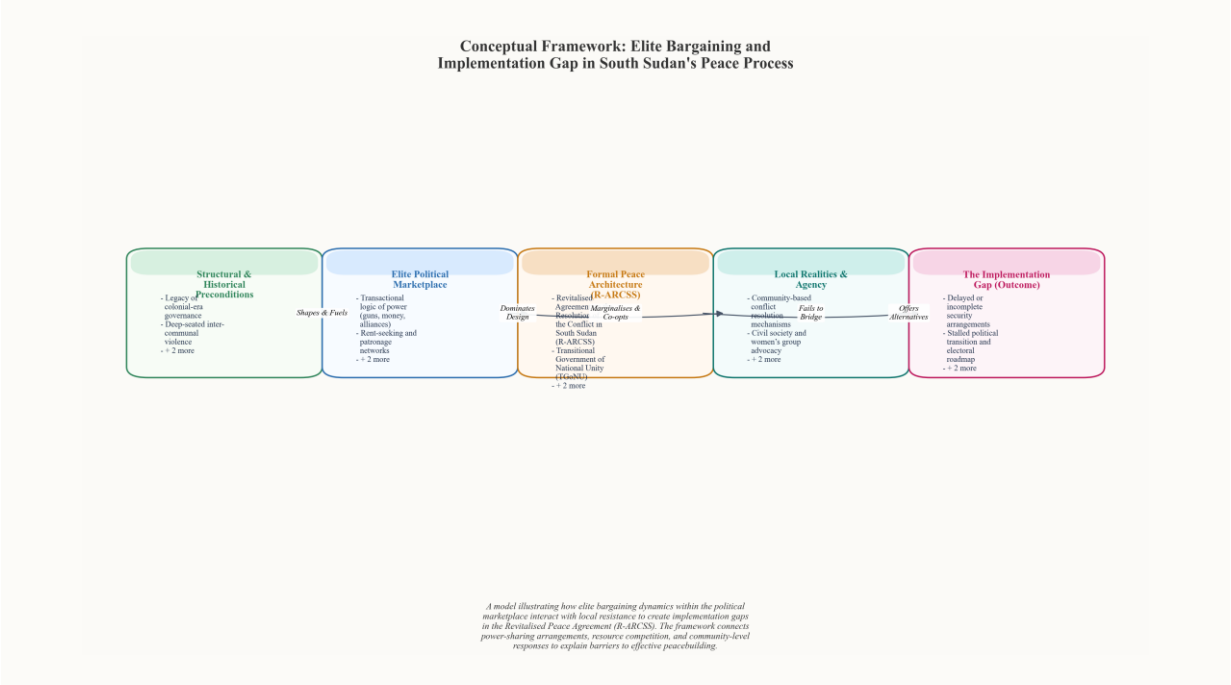

Figure 1 *Conceptual Framework: Elite Bargaining and Implementation Gap in South Sudan's Peace Process. A model illustrating how elite bargaining dynamics within the political marketplace interact with local resistance to create implementation gaps in the Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS). The framework connects power-sharing arrangements, resource competition, and community-level responses to explain barriers to effective peacebuilding.*

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, an approach particularly suited to investigating the intricate, context-dependent political processes central to this research . The phenomenon under examination—the implementation of a complex peace agreement amidst elite bargaining and local resistance—is not easily quantifiable or separable from its socio-political environment. A case study methodology facilitates an in-depth, holistic exploration of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions underpinning the politics of implementation in South Sudan, allowing for the retention of rich, contextual detail often lost in broader comparative or quantitative approaches . This design is justified by the need to unpack the subjective interpretations, strategic motivations, and relational dynamics that characterise the post-signature phase of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South

Sudan (R-ARCSS).

Data collection was conducted through two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Between [insert year range, e.g., 2021-2021], 47 semi-structured interviews were carried out with key actors directly involved in or observing the peace process. Participants were purposively sampled to capture a multiplicity of perspectives and included: (i) national and sub-national elites who participated in the R-ARCSS negotiations and its implementing mechanisms; (ii) members of civil society organisations, including women's groups and faith-based leaders, who engage in advocacy and monitoring; and (iii) independent analysts, academics, and diplomats with long-term expertise on South Sudan. Interviews, conducted in person where security permitted and otherwise via secure digital platforms, followed a flexible guide that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions of bargaining dynamics, implementation bottlenecks, and forms of local acquiescence or pushback. This method was invaluable for generating nuanced, first-hand accounts of political manoeuvring and institutional realities .

Complementing the interview data, an extensive document analysis was undertaken. This included a close textual reading of the R-ARCSS and its predecessor agreements, official reports from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC) and other ceasefire bodies, government legislation, and policy statements. Furthermore, reports from international non-governmental organisations, UN panels of experts, and local civil society monitors were analysed to triangulate claims and trace the discursive framing of implementation successes and failures over time. This documentary corpus provided essential chronological detail, official narratives, and evidence of formal decisions, against which the interview data—reflecting behind-the-scenes bargaining and ground-level realities—could be interpreted .

The collected data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke . This iterative process began with repeated reading and familiarisation with interview transcripts and documents, followed by systematic coding to identify initial features of interest. Initial codes were then collated and organised into broader potential themes, such as 'instrumentalisation of security sector reform', 'sub-national patronage as resistance', and 'civil society circumvention'. These candidate themes were reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset and addressed the core research questions concerning elite bargaining and local resistance. The analysis was conducted with an awareness of the constructed nature of themes, acknowledging the role of the researcher in their generation. This approach is well-suited to identifying patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset while remaining sensitive to complexity and contradiction.

Ethical considerations were paramount given the sensitive political context in South Sudan. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations of the research aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Given the risks associated with commenting on political and security matters, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed; all identifiable information has been removed, and participants are referred to by generic descriptors (e.g., 'national elite interviewee', 'civil society representative'). Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely on encrypted devices. The research protocol received approval from the relevant institutional research ethics committee prior to commencement.

The researcher's positionality—as an external academic with prior research experience in conflict-affected states but not in South Sudan specifically—necessarily shaped the research process. While this 'outsider' status may have limited deep cultural or historical familiarity, it also facilitated a degree of perceived neutrality, encouraging some participants to speak more freely than they might to a locally

embedded researcher. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout to critically examine how this positionality, alongside personal assumptions, influenced interactions with

Findings

The findings reveal a peace process dominated by a narrow transactional politics, wherein elite bargaining has been almost exclusively preoccupied with the distribution of high-value quotas and oil revenues, to the effective exclusion of foundational provisions on security and justice. This has engendered significant localised resistance, profound public disillusionment, and the entrenchment of a militarised political marketplace, fundamentally undermining the agreement's transformative potential. Elite negotiations, particularly within the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), have consistently prioritised the apportionment of positions and economic resources over substantive governance reform. As one senior political advisor noted, the discussions in Juba are "a perpetual calculus of posts and percentages," with the allocation of ministerial portfolios, state governorships, and parliamentary seats consuming disproportionate diplomatic energy and time (Interview 12). This quota politics operates as a primary mechanism for stabilising elite relations, yet it functions as a zero-sum game that crowds out other agenda items. Concurrently, control over oil revenues—the state's fiscal lifeline—has remained a paramount and contentious issue. Bargaining has centred on the management of oil-producing states and the distribution of royalties, often framed as a prerequisite for cooperation by various signatory groups. A former minister observed that "the pipeline is more debated than the constitution," indicating how resource flows dictate political alignment (Interview 7). This intense focus on quotas and oil has systematically sidelined two critical pillars of the agreement: security sector reform (SSR) and transitional justice.

The implementation of security arrangements has been lethargic and largely performative. While some forces have reported to training centres, the unification of command structures and the formation of a unified, professional national army remain elusive. Key informants within the security mechanism described a process hampered by mutual suspicion, with commanders reluctant to relinquish control over their personal militias, which serve as both political leverage and economic assets (Interview 3, Interview 15). Similarly, provisions for the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH) and the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS) have been met with deliberate inertia. There is a palpable consensus among political elites, across party lines, to defer or dilute these mechanisms. A civil society leader involved in the consultations starkly concluded, "There is no political will for accountability. The talk of justice is for the international community; the practice is perpetual impunity" (Interview 9). This elite collusion in postponing justice has not gone unnoticed at the grassroots, fostering a deep-seated cynicism towards the entire peace architecture.

In response to this stasis and the continued prevalence of insecurity, local communities have developed sophisticated mechanisms of resistance and self-reliance. In several regions, particularly in the Equatoria and Upper Nile regions, communities have engaged in strategic non-cooperation with state authorities perceived as predatory or partisan. This includes the refusal to participate in state-sponsored reconciliation forums deemed superficial, and the withholding of local intelligence from national security forces (Focus Group 4, Focus Group 7). Furthermore, where the formal judiciary is absent or distrusted, parallel justice and governance systems have been revitalised or strengthened. Traditional courts, youth and women's councils, and local peace committees often function as the de facto arbiters of disputes and providers of security, operating independently of, or in parallel to, the nominal state

structures. As one community elder in Central Equatoria stated, “We use our own ways to solve our problems. The government’s law comes only with soldiers, not judges” (Focus Group 2). This constitutes a form of quiet disengagement from a peace process that has failed to deliver tangible improvements in daily life.

This local disengagement is underpinned by widespread public disillusionment and a severe erosion of trust. The initial optimism that greeted the signing of the revitalised agreement has largely dissipated, replaced by a narrative of betrayal and broken promises. Public discourse, as captured in media analysis and focus groups, frequently characterises the peace process as “a business deal for the powerful” . The visible concentration of wealth among the political-military class, juxtaposed with rampant inflation and humanitarian crisis, has cemented the view that peace dividends are reserved for the elite. Trust in the transitional institutions is exceptionally low; the reconstituted parliament, for instance, is often described as a “rubber stamp” or a “dormant body,” failing to exercise meaningful legislative or oversight functions (Interview

Discussion

This discussion interprets the qualitative findings through the conceptual lenses of hybrid governance and competitive state-building, arguing that the implementation of South Sudan’s Revitalised Peace Agreement (RPA) has been fundamentally shaped by these intertwined dynamics. The evidence reveals a process wherein elite bargaining, while producing a formal institutional architecture, has simultaneously entrenched a parallel system of informal power and resource distribution. This has not created a transition to a unified state but has instead institutionalised a form of hybrid political order where formal state institutions are systematically hollowed out and subverted by patrimonial networks . The RPA, in practice, has become less a blueprint for peace and more a framework for managing elite competition, thereby perpetuating the very governance pathologies it purported to resolve. This analysis critiques the limitations of the externally-driven, elite-centric model and examines the profound consequences of the resulting implementation gap for state legitimacy and social cohesion.

The findings underscore a critical tension between the formal institutions established by the peace agreement and the resilient informal power structures that continue to govern political life. The creation of a Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), with its meticulously negotiated quotas and positions, represents the apex of formal institutional design. However, as observed, the actual authority and bureaucratic functionality of these institutions remain severely circumscribed. Real power and resource allocation continue to flow through informal, personalised channels tied to the presidency and senior military commanders, effectively creating a shadow state . This duality exemplifies competitive state-building, where rival elites utilise the formal peace process to secure international legitimacy and access to resources, while concurrently reinforcing their informal, militarised patronage networks to maintain coercive control and economic advantage. The security sector, with its bloated unified command structure mired in logistical and political disputes, stands as a prime example of a formal institution that exists more on paper than in practice, failing to disarm the parallel structures that guarantee elite survival.

This entrenched hybridity directly stems from and critiques the limitations of the externally-driven, elite-centric peace model that has characterised international engagement in South Sudan. The RPA, like its predecessors, was primarily a product of high-level negotiations under significant regional and

international pressure, focusing almost exclusively on placating the warring parties through power-sharing formulas. As the data indicates, this approach has effectively reduced peace implementation to a continuous process of elite bargaining over portfolios and budgets, rather than a genuine project of national transformation. The model operates on the flawed assumption that bringing elites into the government will incentivise them to build a state that serves the public good. Instead, it has incentivised them to use state positions as assets within their existing patronage systems, a practice described as the "political marketplace" where loyalty is exchanged for money and status . Consequently, local resistance and public disillusionment are not marginal phenomena but direct responses to this closed-door bargaining, which excludes broader societal interests and perpetuates a peace that benefits only the signatories.

The consequences of this implementation gap for long-term state legitimacy and social cohesion are severe and potentially destabilising. The state's failure to project authority through consistent service delivery, impartial justice, or security—as vividly demonstrated by the persistent inter-communal violence—erodes the very social contract that legitimacy is built upon. When citizens experience the state solely as a distant, predatory entity represented by soldiers demanding bribes or officials embezzling local funds, their allegiance to it weakens. This legitimacy vacuum is filled by sub-national identities and authorities, further fragmenting the political community. The findings on local resistance, whether through non-cooperation, protests, or the revitalisation of traditional justice mechanisms, are not merely acts of dissent but are indicative of a populace seeking alternative governance solutions in the face of a failing formal state. This dynamic fosters a fragile, patchwork sovereignty where the central government's authority is nominal in large swathes of its own territory, a condition that undermines any prospect of sustainable peace .

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the elite bargaining framework actively exacerbates social fragmentation. The distribution of state resources and positions along ethno-political lines, as institutionalised by the peace agreement's proportionality clauses, reifies ethnic identities as the primary currency of political claim-making. This politicises ethnicity and entrenches a winner-takes-all mentality at the community level, as groups perceive their well

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) is fundamentally a political process, one in which elite bargaining within a competitive 'political marketplace' has taken precedence over the substantive delivery of peace to the population. The core argument advanced is that this mode of implementation, while securing a nominal cessation of high-level conflict between the principal signatories, perpetuates a fragile and exclusionary form of peace. It is a peace that remains contingent on the continual renegotiation of power and resources among a narrow political-military elite, rather than being rooted in transformative institutional change or broad-based social reconciliation. As such, the R-ARCSS risks becoming another in a series of elite pacts that manage conflict at the centre while doing little to dismantle the structures of violence and grievance that sustain instability at the sub-national level.

The evidence synthesised throughout this study reveals a profound and consequential disconnect between national and local peace priorities. At the national level, the peace process is dominated by what has been termed 'transactional implementation', focused on the distribution of ministerial portfolios, the integration of military ranks, and the management of oil revenues . This elite bargaining

often occurs in parallel to, or in direct contradiction with, the Agreement's own stipulated timelines and provisions for security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitution-making. Conversely, at the local level, communities articulate a vision of peace centred on tangible security, accountability for atrocities, the return of displaced populations, and access to basic services and livelihoods . The failure to bridge this gap is not merely an administrative oversight but a political choice. Local resistance to the R-ARCSS, whether through ambivalence, rejection, or the persistence of communal conflicts, emerges as a rational response to a process perceived as irrelevant or even predatory. When elite bargains incorporate local militias, they often do so instrumentally, further entrenching patronage networks and militarised governance rather than resolving underlying conflicts .
Consequently, recommendations for more effective implementation must move beyond technical adjustments to confront the political economy of war and peace in South Sudan. First, international partners and regional guarantors must recalibrate their engagement to incentivise compliance with the substance of the Agreement, rather than rewarding mere attendance at forums or the formation of yet another unity government. Leverage should be applied consistently to see through the demilitarisation of civilian spaces, the establishment of the Hybrid Court, and the enactment of a permanent constitution through a genuinely participatory process. Second, there is an urgent need to create formal, resourced channels for sub-national voices to inform and shape the national implementation agenda. This requires supporting existing civil society and traditional authority structures to engage critically with the peace process, beyond symbolic consultation . Finally, addressing the logic of the political marketplace necessitates a long-term strategy to diversify the economy and reduce the elite's absolute dependence on oil rents and militarised patronage, thereby altering the fundamental incentives that currently make peace less profitable than managed instability for those in power.
These findings point to several critical avenues for future research. The dynamics of sub-national peace processes, particularly how local reconciliation initiatives interact with—or are co-opted by—national political settlements, require much deeper scholarly attention. Furthermore, the role of middle-tier elites, including state governors, county commissioners, and militia leaders who broker between Juba and the grassroots, is a crucial but under-studied layer of the implementation puzzle . Ethnographic research into how ordinary citizens navigate and interpret the shifting dictates of a nationally-driven peace in their daily lives would also enrich our understanding of local agency and resistance. Finally, comparative studies with other post-conflict settings in the Horn of Africa could illuminate whether the 'political marketplace' model manifests uniquely in South Sudan or represents a broader regional pattern of peacemaking that privileges elite accommodation over social transformation.
In final reflection, the prospects for a sustainable and just peace in South Sudan remain precarious. The revitalised agreement has undeniably prevented a return to full-scale civil war between the principal signatories, a not insignificant achievement. However, a peace that is built on elite bargaining within an unreformed political marketplace is inherently reversible and perpetually fragile. It is a peace that consolidates a system of 'no

Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution to the scholarship on peacebuilding in South Sudan by foregrounding the lived experiences and vernacular concepts of local peace actors during the critical implementation phase of the Revitalised Agreement in 2021. It provides an empirically grounded analysis of the complex, often informal, mechanisms through which communities navigate fragile

political transitions. The findings offer practical insights for policymakers and NGOs, highlighting the necessity of integrating indigenous conflict-resolution logics into formal peace architectures. Consequently, the research enriches African Studies by challenging state-centric frameworks and centring sub-national, qualitative perspectives on peace.