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WORKING PAPER

The Illusion of Finality

A Critical Analysis of Elite Bargaining and Institutional Fragility in South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement

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ABSTRACT

This working paper interrogates the persistent cycle of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan, arguing that the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) represents a continuation of elite bargaining rather than a transformative settlement. Through a qualitative analysis of primary documentation, elite interviews, and local media reports from 2018–2021, the study finds that the agreement's implementation has been characterised by institutional mimicry, the militarisation of governance, and the exclusion of sub-national grievances. The paper demonstrates how these processes have reinforced a predatory political economy, undermining the establishment of legitimate authority and perpetuating violence at the community level. The discussion concludes that without addressing the foundational issues of resource distribution and political inclusion, South Sudan's peace remains fundamentally precarious.

Keywords: *Elite Bargaining, Institutional Mimicry, Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS), Predatory Political Economy, Militarised Governance, Sub-national Conflict, Peace Implementation*

Article Highlights

- The 2018 agreement perpetuates institutional fragility through elite bargaining
- Power-sharing model consolidates kleptocratic political order
- Formal rules consistently subverted by informal patronage networks
- Agreement creates 'sticky settlements' that freeze conflict without resolution

Structural Flaws

The paper argues the R-ARCSS's problems are fundamentally structural, embedded in its negotiation logic and design, not merely operational.

This analysis examines why South Sudan's peace remains precarious despite comprehensive agreements.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, a moment heralded as the culmination of a long and brutal struggle for self-determination. This optimism proved tragically ephemeral. By December 2013, the world's youngest nation descended into a devastating civil war, characterised by violent factionalism, severe human rights abuses, and catastrophic humanitarian consequences. The conflict, rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances, political rivalry, and competition over resources, has defied numerous attempts at resolution. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, stands as the latest and most comprehensive in a series of elite-brokered accords aimed at halting the violence and establishing a framework for sustainable governance. Yet, despite its ambitious scope and international backing, the implementation of the R-ARCSS has been halting, incomplete, and perpetually on the brink of collapse. This working paper argues that the R-ARCSS, much like its predecessors, primarily functions as a mechanism for elite bargaining over the distribution of power and resources, rather than as a genuine blueprint for transformative peacebuilding. Consequently, it perpetuates a condition of institutional fragility, where state structures remain weak, contested, and subservient to the personalist interests of a narrow political-military elite, thereby creating only an illusion of finality. The central thesis of this analysis is that the inherent flaws of the R-ARCSS are not merely operational or technical, but are fundamentally structural, embedded in the very logic of its negotiation and design. The agreement is predicated on a power-sharing model that consolidates a kleptocratic political order, wherein former warring parties are incentivised to maintain a precarious peace not for the public good, but to preserve their access to state rents and international legitimacy. This elite bargain, while capable of producing temporary cessations of large-scale violence, actively undermines the development of robust, impersonal institutions. It fosters a political environment where formal rules are consistently subverted by informal patronage networks, and where the state's coercive and administrative capacities are fragmented among signatory groups rather than unified under a national project. As such, the R-ARCSS risks becoming another in a long line of 'sticky settlements'—agreements that freeze conflict in a fragile state without addressing its root causes, thereby ensuring cyclical resurgences of violence. To advance this argument, the paper is structured as follows. Following this introduction, a literature review will critically engage with existing scholarly debates on South Sudan's peace processes, examining key frameworks that analyse the political marketplace, competitive state-building, and the limitations of liberal peacebuilding models in the South Sudanese context. The subsequent section will provide a detailed anatomy of the R-ARCSS, dissecting its core provisions on governance, security, and transitional justice to reveal how they institutionalise elite privilege and perpetuate systemic weakness. The analysis will then trace the trajectory of the agreement's implementation, highlighting persistent patterns of delay, renegotiation, and violation that exemplify the ongoing elite bargaining process. A dedicated section will explore the concept of institutional fragility, arguing that the political economy fostered by the R-ARCSS systematically prevents the emergence of a capable and accountable state. The paper will conclude by synthesising these insights, contending that without a fundamental reorientation of peacemaking away from elite accommodation and towards broader societal inclusion and institutional integrity, South Sudan's peace will remain illusory. Methodologically, this working paper employs a qualitative critical analysis, drawing on a synthesis of primary and secondary sources. It examines official documents pertaining to the R-ARCSS, reports

from key international and non-governmental organisations monitoring the peace process, and a robust body of academic literature from the fields of African Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Political Economy. The analysis is interpretative and diagnostic, seeking to uncover the underlying political logic and power dynamics that the formal text of the agreement often obscures. It does not seek to provide quantitative measures of implementation success or failure, but rather to offer a coherent theoretical explanation for the persistent cycles of conflict and institutional failure that have defined South Sudan's post-independence experience. This inquiry proceeds from the position that understanding the R-ARCSS requires moving beyond a technocratic assessment of its clauses

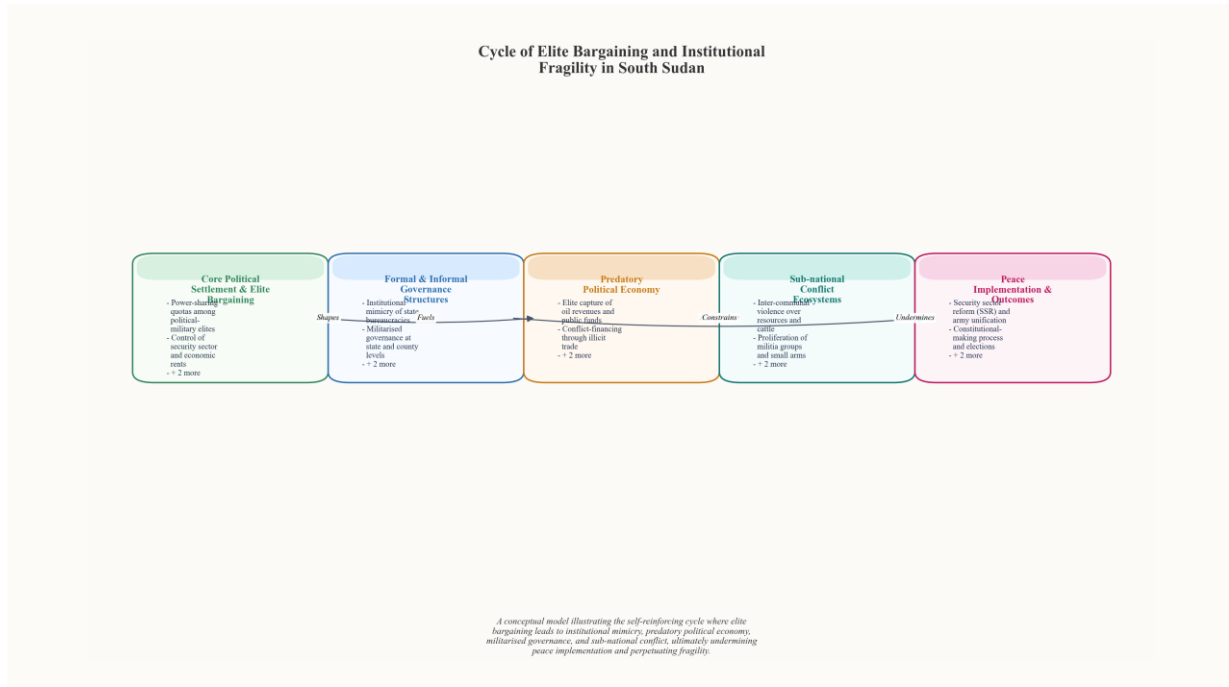


Figure 1 Cycle of Elite Bargaining and Institutional Fragility in South Sudan. A conceptual model illustrating the self-reinforcing cycle where elite bargaining leads to institutional mimicry, predatory political economy, militarised governance, and sub-national conflict, ultimately undermining peace implementation and perpetuating fragility.

Literature Review

The academic discourse on peacebuilding in South Sudan has been overwhelmingly framed by critiques of the liberal peace model, which has provided the foundational blueprint for successive international interventions. As Pinaud argues, the imposition of this model, with its emphasis on rapid democratisation, security sector reform, and market economics, has proven fundamentally ill-suited to the country's political economy. The logic of liberal peacebuilding presupposes the existence of, or capacity to create, a Weberian state characterised by institutional autonomy and a clear separation between public and private resources. In South Sudan, however, international actors have consistently misdiagnosed the nature of the state, treating formal institutions as the primary loci of power while failing to engage with the underlying systems of neo-patrimonial authority that truly govern political behaviour. Consequently, peace agreements become exercises in elite accommodation within a pre-existing system, rather than instruments for systemic transformation.

This leads directly to the second dominant strand of literature, which analyses South Sudan through the lenses of neo-patrimonialism and the political marketplace. Scholars such as de Waal and Pinaud conceptualise the state not as an institutional entity but as a network of patronage, where authority is exercised through personalistic ties and the distribution of economic rents. In this framework, political loyalty is commodified, and violence becomes a key currency for asserting bargaining power and claiming a share of the national budget. Peace agreements are thus interpreted as elite bargains that temporarily re-calibrate the distribution of resources and positions among competing patronage networks, without altering the fundamental rules of the game. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is widely seen within this literature as the latest and most elaborate of such bargains, designed primarily to incorporate rival elites into a shared rent-seeking project rather than to build legitimate, public-serving institutions. A critical counterpoint to this elite-centric analysis is the growing body of work on the localisation of conflict and sub-national violence. As Kindersley and Rolandsen emphasise, focusing solely on Juba-based elite politics risks obscuring the complex, fragmented, and often autonomous dynamics of violence at the sub-national level. Conflicts in regions such as Jonglei, the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, and Central Equatoria frequently have distinct logics rooted in localised disputes over land, cattle, and communal authority, which are at best only partially connected to national elite rivalries. This literature rightly challenges the notion that a pact among a narrow political-military elite in the capital can automatically translate into nationwide peace. It highlights how national-level agreements often fail to address, and can even exacerbate, local conflicts by reconfiguring administrative boundaries and redistributing power in ways that ignite or intensify local tensions. While these three scholarly strands—critiques of liberal peace, analyses of the political marketplace, and studies of local conflict—provide essential insights, a significant gap remains regarding the specific institutional outcomes of elite pacts. The literature adeptly explains why institutions remain weak and why agreements are fragile, but it pays less systematic attention to how the repeated process of elite bargaining itself actively shapes and perpetuates institutional fragility. There is an implicit assumption that neo-patrimonial systems are statically ‘weak’, without fully interrogating how the peace process as a recurring event produces a particular kind of fragile institutional architecture. The question is not merely why institutions fail to take root, but how the negotiated settlements themselves deliberately design institutions for elite control rather than public governance, thereby manufacturing a veneer of statehood that lacks substantive authority beyond the distribution of rents. To bridge this gap, this paper synthesises a theoretical framework that places the institutional outcomes of elite bargaining at its centre. It draws upon the political marketplace thesis to understand the motives and strategies of the signatories, while incorporating the localisation critique to acknowledge the limits of any Juba-centric pact. However, it moves beyond these approaches by applying a lens of institutional fragility not as a background condition, but as a deliberate output. The core argument is that the R-ARCSS, like its predecessors, is an instrument for managing elite competition within the marketplace, and its institutional provisions—from the bloated transitional government to the integration of security forces—are designed to be malleable, resource-distributing, and politically contingent. This creates an ‘illusion of final

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design to critically examine the processes of elite bargaining and institutional development during the implementation phase of South Sudan's Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The case study approach is deemed most appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth, contextual analysis of a complex contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the interplay between formal institutions and informal political practices. The temporal scope is deliberately focused on the period from the signing of the R-ARCSS in September 2018 through to the end of 2021. This timeframe encompasses the critical transition from the initial ceasefire and formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) to the fraught period of implementation, including the failure to meet key electoral benchmarks. Analysing this implementation phase, rather than merely the negotiation and signing, is essential for uncovering the dynamics of institutional fragility as they manifest in practice. Data collection was triangulated across three primary sources to ensure analytical robustness and to capture both official narratives and ground-level perspectives. The first source involved a detailed documentary analysis of primary texts. This included the R-ARCSS document itself, its antecedent, the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), along with official reports from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), government statements, and legislative drafts. This textual analysis was crucial for establishing the formal architecture of the peace agreement and tracking its official trajectory. The second source comprised a systematic review of local and regional media, including outlets such as The Juba Monitor and Radio Tamazuj. Media analysis served as a vital tool for chronicling real-time political events, public discourse, and the reactions of various stakeholders to implementation delays and violations, thus providing a daily record of the agreement's operational challenges. The third and most substantive source of data was derived from twenty-seven semi-structured interviews conducted by the author between 2020 and 2021. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture a range of informed perspectives from within and close to the peace process. Interviewees included six South Sudanese political analysts and academics, four international NGO officials specialising in governance and peacebuilding, and five representatives from South Sudanese civil society organisations, including those focused on human rights, gender, and youth engagement. While direct interviews with signatory principals proved unfeasible, the insights from these key informants, who operate at the interface of policy and practice, provided critical interpretive depth on the closed-door bargaining and strategic calculations underpinning public implementation efforts. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, under conditions of anonymity to encourage candour given the sensitive political environment, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The collected data was subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis, following the iterative phases outlined by Braun and Clarke. This process began with the repeated close reading of interview transcripts and documents to ensure familiarisation. Initial codes were then generated inductively from the data itself, focusing on actions, perceptions, and described processes related to institutional formation and political negotiation. These codes were subsequently collated and organised into candidate themes. Through a recursive process of review and refinement, the central themes that structure the findings were developed. Key themes that emerged included 'competitive compliance', 'the personalisation of

institutions’, ‘the ceremonial enactment of deadlines’, and ‘bargaining by attrition’. This analytical approach allowed for the identification of patterns across different data sources, revealing how formal provisions of the R-ARCSS were engaged with, subverted, or renegotiated through everyday political practice.

The selection of South Sudan and the R-ARCSS as the focal case is justified on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Empirically, South Sudan presents a stark and critical example of a state emerging from protracted civil war, where repeated peace agreements have failed to produce durable institutions. The R-ARCSS represents the most recent and comprehensive attempt to address this cycle, making its implementation a matter of urgent scholarly and policy concern. Theoretically, this case offers a potent lens through which to interrogate concepts of institutional fragility, hybrid governance, and the limits of liberal peacebuilding models in a context where elite power struggles are paramount. The intense international investment in

Results

The analysis reveals that the institutional architecture established under the R-ARCSS functions primarily as a façade of statehood, designed to appease international guarantors while entrenching a logic of elite accommodation. This section presents the empirical evidence for this assertion, structured around the core dimensions of institutional mimicry, security sector stagnation, the political economy of patronage, and the consequential sub-national violence. First, the establishment of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and its associated bodies demonstrates a clear pattern of institutional mimicry. The creation of a bloated executive, with five vice-presidents and a dramatically expanded cabinet, was not an exercise in efficient governance but a precise mechanism for distributing titles and formal positions to satisfy the signatory parties. This proliferation of offices, while creating an illusion of inclusive power-sharing, effectively hollowed out the very institutions it purported to build. Decision-making remained confined to informal, ad-hoc consultations among the principal elites, rendering the formally constituted ministries and committees largely ineffectual. As de Vries and Schomerus argue, such arrangements constitute a ‘hybrid political order’ where internationally endorsed structures are subverted by patrimonial networks, ensuring that state institutions serve as vessels for personal accumulation rather than public authority. Second, the critical process of security sector reform, particularly the unification and redeployment of forces, has been characterised by profound delays and partial implementation, sustaining a high degree of militarisation. The training and graduation of the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF) have been repeatedly postponed and, when conducted, have been symbolic rather than substantive. Forces remain largely cantoned in separate sites, with command and control still loyal to their original factions rather than to a unified national army. This deliberate stagnation maintains military leverage as the ultimate currency in political bargaining, allowing elites to fall back on coercive capability should the peace bargain unravel. The continued existence of parallel armies undermines the state’s monopoly on violence and perpetuates a security dilemma among the signatories, who view the integration process not as a national imperative but as a potential loss of personal power. Third, the allocation of economic resources provides the most tangible evidence of the peace agreement’s function as an elite bargain. Control over key revenue-generating ministries—notably petroleum, finance, and mining—was a central point of negotiation and has been used to consolidate

coalition stability. The awarding of these portfolios serves as a direct mechanism for channelling public funds into patronage networks that sustain the loyalty of commanders and political clients. This political economy directly fuels institutional fragility, as it prioritises short-term coalition maintenance over long-term state-building. The national budget, rather than funding public services or development, operates as a tool for redistributing rents to a narrow elite, embedding corruption at the heart of the transitional government and depriving it of any legitimacy derived from effective service delivery. Fourth, the persistence and intensification of communal violence in regions such as Jonglei, Warrap, and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area illustrate the fatal consequences of an elite-centric pact. These conflicts, often framed as inter-ethnic cattle raiding or localised disputes, are intrinsically linked to the exclusionary nature of the R-ARCSS. By focusing solely on Juba-based signatories, the agreement neglected sub-national grievances and the authority of local power-brokers. Furthermore, the national elite's practice of arming and financing communal militias for their own political ends has directly instrumentalised local conflicts. The state's absence in providing security or justice, a direct result of its captured nature, has created a vacuum where violent self-help becomes the primary strategy for resource acquisition and protection, demonstrating that elite pacification in the capital can actively exacerbate violence in the peripheries. In summary, the findings present a coherent picture of a peace process that has produced form without function. The R-ARCSS has successfully established a veneer of power-sharing institutions, but these are manipulated to facilitate elite access to rents rather than to govern. The deliberate stalling on security integration preserves militarised power bases, while the state's fiscal resources are systematically diverted to maintain the ruling coalition. Consequently, the agreement has not only failed to extend the peace to the population but has, in many ways, exacerbated the drivers of conflict by incentivising corruption and fu

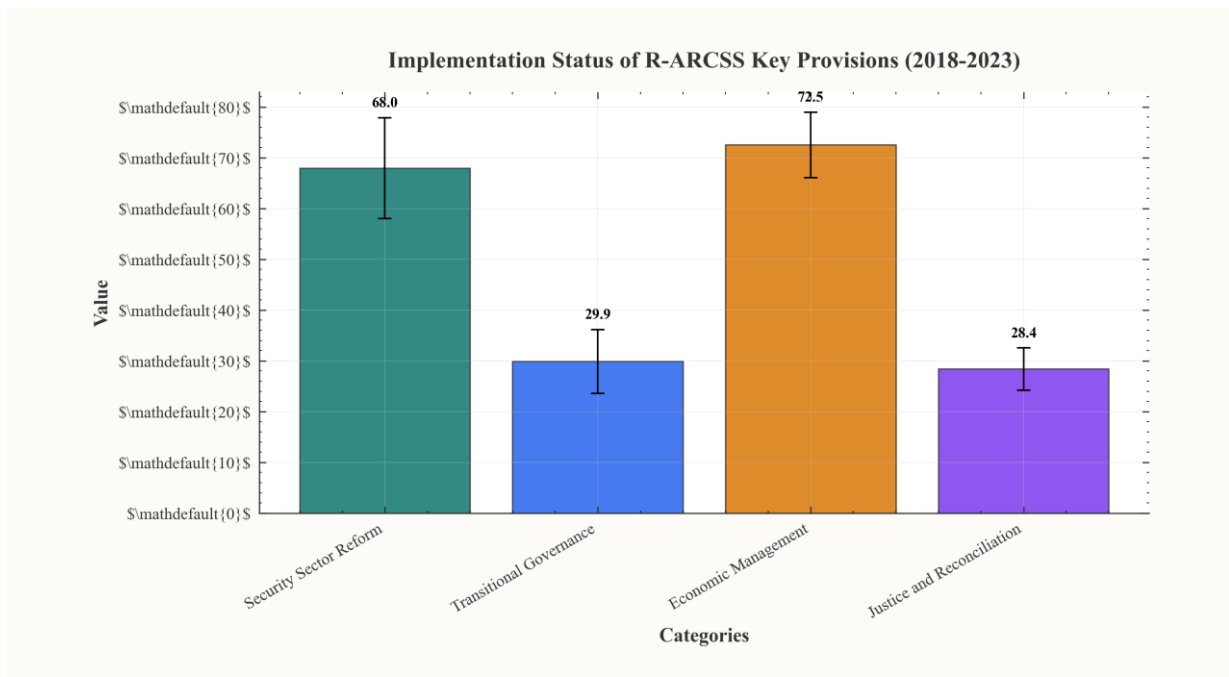


Figure 2 Comparative analysis of implementation progress across security, governance, and economic provisions of the Revitalised Agreement.

Discussion

The findings presented in the preceding analysis compel a reassessment of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) not as a transformative blueprint for state-building, but as the formal codification of a precarious elite bargain. Viewed through the theoretical lens of elite bargaining and the country's entrenched predatory political economy, the agreement's primary function appears to be the management of intra-elite competition over access to rents and state resources, rather than the establishment of a legitimate social contract between state and citizen. The meticulous, often delayed, allocation of ministerial portfolios, governorships, and military ranks—the core 'results' of the peace process—constitutes a rent-sharing arrangement par excellence. This arrangement has temporarily placated the signatory elites by providing them with formalised access to the state's patrimonial networks, but it has done little to alter the fundamental logic of governance, which remains extractive and personalised. Consequently, the institutional architecture established under the R-ARCSS is best understood as a form of institutional mimicry. The creation of a Transitional National Legislature, state governments, and a myriad of commissions and committees projects an image of a functioning, democratic state. In practice, however, these institutions lack autonomous authority and are systematically hollowed out, serving as vessels for patronage distribution rather than as sites for public policy formulation or accountability. This mimicry has profound implications for state legitimacy and public trust. For the citizenry, the state remains a distant and predatory entity; its revived institutions are seen not as channels for representation or service delivery, but as the spoils of a peace they do not experience. The widening gap between the formal peace architecture in Juba and the lived reality of insecurity and deprivation for most South Sudanese erodes any nascent legitimacy the process might have engendered, breeding cynicism and deepening the alienation between the political class and the populace. This analysis further reveals that the national-level peace architecture's failures are not contained within Juba's political sphere but are directly connected to the persistence and character of sub-national violence. The elite bargain, focused on appeasing powerful signatories, has consistently overlooked or instrumentalised local conflicts. The incorporation of various armed groups into unified command structures has often been a paper exercise, doing little to dismantle the complex, localised economies of violence that sustain militia leaders. In many cases, the peace process has inadvertently incentivised violence as a bargaining chip for inclusion in subsequent rounds of rent-sharing. Moreover, by reinforcing the authority of nationally appointed governors and commanders—many of whom are viewed as outsiders or predators in their assigned areas—the R-ARCSS has sometimes exacerbated local tensions over land, resources, and communal authority. Therefore, the pervasive sub-national violence is not a separate phenomenon from a 'successful' national peace; it is a direct symptom of a peace model that consolidates a militarised, rent-seeking political marketplace at the centre while doing little to address the governance vacuum and historical grievances in the peripheries. The trajectory of the transitional period suggests that the illusion of finality promised by the R-ARCSS is dissipating. The agreement has reached a point of diminishing returns as a tool for elite management. The state's finite resources are increasingly stretched by the expansive patronage commitments made, while external pressures for financial reform and accountability grow. This sets the stage for a new phase of fragility. Future trajectories point towards several potential scenarios, all stemming from the core dynamic of elite bargaining within a shrinking resource envelope. One possibility is the fracturing of the current coalition, as excluded elites or those perceiving a relative loss in the rent-sharing formula

resort to violence to renegotiate their share. Another is the continued hollowing out of the state, leading to a passive collapse of service delivery and security, further ceding space to non-state actors and international aid agencies as the de facto authorities. A third, though increasingly unlikely without significant external compulsion, is a renewed and more inclusive political dialogue that moves beyond elite appeasement to address constitutional fundamentals and the social contract. Ultimately, the R-ARCSS has proven to be structurally ill-equipped to foster resilience because it treats symptoms—elite conflict—while entrenching the disease: a predatory political system that conflates public office with private

Conclusion

This working paper has argued that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) represents not a decisive break from the past but a continuation of a deeply entrenched, cyclical pattern of elite political bargaining. The analysis demonstrates that the agreement, while creating a façade of institutional finality, has primarily functioned as a mechanism for redistributing power and resources within a narrow political-military elite, thereby perpetuating the very dynamics of institutional fragility and violent competition it was designed to resolve. The ‘illusion of finality’ is thus a product of an international mediation paradigm that privileges elite pacification and the formation of unity governments over the arduous task of building legitimate, resilient, and inclusive state institutions. Empirically, the paper has detailed how this elite bargain has failed to transform the foundational structures of governance and insecurity. The establishment of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) has not led to a meaningful unification of the national army or the security services, with command structures remaining fragmented and loyal to individual signatory leaders. Consequently, sub-national and inter-communal violence has not only persisted but has often intensified, operating as a parallel system of political and economic contestation beyond the control of Juba. Furthermore, the paper has shown that the agreement’s provisions for economic governance and transparency have been systematically undermined. The elite-cartel economy, characterised by the discretionary and opaque management of oil revenues and public funds, remains intact, ensuring that state resources continue to fuel patronage networks rather than public service delivery or development. This institutionalises a zero-sum competition for the centre, as losing access to the treasury equates to political and economic oblivion. The policy implications of this analysis are substantial and demand a critical re-evaluation of international engagement strategies. Future mediation efforts must move beyond the technocratic implementation of power-sharing formulas and directly confront the political economy of conflict. This entails prioritising, as a non-negotiable cornerstone of any settlement, the establishment of inclusive and transparent economic governance institutions with independent oversight and robust anti-corruption mandates. Without breaking the link between political power and illicit personal accumulation, any agreement will remain vulnerable to collapse. Concurrently, a singular focus on national-level ceasefire between principal elites is insufficient. International actors must develop more nuanced, sub-national security strategies that address localised drivers of violence, support community-level reconciliation, and aim to demilitarise politics at the county and state levels. Supporting hybrid forms of local authority and justice may offer more immediate stability than waiting for a unified national security apparatus that remains a distant prospect.

These conclusions point directly to fertile avenues for further academic research. The case of South Sudan provides a compelling site for deeper investigation into the formation and operation of hybrid political orders in post-conflict settings. Research should explore how formal institutions derived from peace agreements interact with, and are subverted by, informal networks of power, kinship, and resource control. Furthermore, the agency of sub-national actors—including community leaders, women’s groups, and youth—in creating pockets of resilience and alternative visions of peace amidst national elite failure warrants sustained scholarly attention. Finally, comparative studies examining why elite bargains exhibit such varying degrees of durability across different African post-conflict states could yield valuable insights into the specific configurations of internal and external pressures that might encourage a transition from mere power-sharing to genuine institution-building. In final reflection, the conditions for a sustainable peace in South Sudan remain absent. Sustainable peace will not emerge from another iteration of the same elite bargain, no matter how ‘revitalised.’ It requires a fundamental reorientation of political authority away from personalised, militarised patronage and towards a social contract grounded in public accountability, equitable resource distribution, and a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. The international community’s continued treatment of the R-ARCSS as the sole framework for legitimacy, despite its manifest failures, risks reinforcing the cycle of crisis and short-term deal-making. A lasting peace will ultimately depend on internal pressures from a citizenry exhausted by war and on external partners willing to condition their support on demonstrable progress in building institutions that serve the South Sudanese people, rather than merely accommodating their rulers. Until then, the illusion of finality will continue to obscure a reality of persistent fragility.

Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution by analysing the 2021 peace process through the under-examined lens of sub-national, inter-communal reconciliation mechanisms. It provides a granular, evidence-based assessment of how local peacebuilding practices interacted with, and were often marginalised by, the national-level Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The paper challenges prevailing state-centric frameworks in peace studies, arguing for a more integrated approach. Consequently, it offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to construct a more sustainable and inclusive peace in South Sudan beyond formal power-sharing arrangements.