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QUALITATIVE STUDY

The Politics of Implementation

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

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the complex dynamics of peace implementation in South Sudan, focusing on the period following the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It argues that the formal peace process has been consistently undermined by a parallel system of elite bargaining, which perpetuates cycles of violence and institutional fragility. Through an analysis of local perceptions and elite manoeuvring, the research identifies key structural and agential barriers to meaningful peacebuilding. The findings contribute to broader debates on hybrid political orders and the limitations of internationally brokered peace agreements in contexts of entrenched patrimonial governance.

Keywords: *South Sudan peace process, Elite bargaining, R-ARCSS implementation, Hybrid political order, Local resistance, Patrimonial governance, Peace agreement fatigue*

Article Highlights

- Examines the disjuncture between formal peace architecture and informal patrimonial realities
- Identifies elite bargaining as perpetuating cycles of violence and institutional fragility
- Foregrounds local resistance and community-led initiatives often overlooked in top-down analyses
- Challenges narratives of state-centric failure by highlighting civil society resilience

Research Focus

Qualitative analysis of how elite bargaining within transitional government and local resistance in peripheries shape R-ARCSS implementation.

This study provides granular evidence from South Sudan during 2021-2022.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope rapidly dissolved into a devastating civil war that erupted in December 2013. The conflict, rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances, elite competition, and the politicisation of ethnic identities, has been characterised by extreme violence, widespread displacement, and severe humanitarian suffering. In an attempt to halt the carnage, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in September 2018, building upon and superseding the failed 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS). The R-ARCSS represents the latest in a series of internationally-backed peace initiatives, featuring a detailed roadmap for a transitional government, security sector reform, justice, and a permanent constitution. However, the implementation process has been persistently stalled, fragmented, and marked by repeated violations, raising critical questions about why such a comprehensive formal agreement continues to falter.

This persistent cycle of agreement and collapse necessitates a critical examination of the dominant peacebuilding paradigms applied to South Sudan. Much of the international approach has been underpinned by the model of liberal peacebuilding, which prescribes a standardised template of democratisation, state institution-building, and market-oriented reforms as the pathway to stability. As scholars like Mac Ginty and Richmond argue, this model often operates as a top-down, technocratic project, privileging formal institutions and legalistic frameworks while marginalising local agency and alternative conceptions of peace. In the South Sudanese context, this has translated into peace processes that are heavily reliant on elite bargaining in distant capital cities or foreign hotels, resulting in agreements that are 'imported' rather than organically cultivated. Pinaud observes that such processes can inadvertently reinforce the very power structures they seek to transform, by channelling resources and legitimacy to rival elite networks in Juba. Consequently, the R-ARCSS, like its predecessors, can be interpreted as a 'compromise among elites' that primarily serves to regulate and temporarily manage competition within the political marketplace, rather than to instigate a fundamental transformation of the political system.

The central research problem, therefore, lies in the profound disjuncture between the formal, institutional architecture of the R-ARCSS and the informal, patrimonial realities of South Sudanese politics. The agreement meticulously outlines timelines, quotas, and committees, creating an illusion of a linear, technocratic implementation process. Yet, on the ground, political life is dominated by personalised elite bargaining, where power is negotiated through the distribution of state resources, military allegiances, and ethnic patronage. This study argues that the implementation of the R-ARCSS is not merely a matter of administrative capacity or political will in the abstract, but a deeply political contestation over the distribution of power and resources. The formal agreement provides a script and a set of stakes, but the actual 'politics of implementation' is conducted through informal channels, ad hoc deals, and often coercive bargaining that frequently subverts the letter and spirit of the signed text. This gap between the formal and the informal, the institutional and the practical, is where the agreement is ultimately made, unmade, and remade.

To interrogate this dynamic, the article is guided by two specific research questions: First, how do elite bargaining and competition within the revitalised transitional government shape and distort the implementation of key provisions of the R-ARCSS? Second, in what ways do expressions of local resistance and alternative visions of authority in South Sudan's peripheries challenge the elite-centric

peace model enshrined in the agreement? Through these questions, the article advances the argument that the stalled implementation of the R-ARCSS is not a simple case of non-compliance, but a logical outcome of a peace process that is insulated from broader societal forces. The agreement's focus on integrating warring elites into a bloated power-sharing government has intensified competition for positions and resources within Juba, while simultaneously failing to address—and often actively suppressing—local demands for accountability, inclusion, and substantive political change from below. This creates a dual reality: a politics of elite accommodation in the centre, and a politics of local resistance and neglect in the margins.
The analysis presented herein is a qualitative study, drawing on extensive fieldwork and primary documentation to trace the political manoeuvring that defines the post-2018 period. It contributes to African Studies and peace

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore the intricate political processes shaping the implementation of South Sudan's Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). An interpretivist epistemology is deemed essential for this inquiry, as it prioritises understanding the subjective meanings, motivations, and lived experiences of key actors engaged in the peace process . The phenomenon under investigation—elite bargaining and local resistance—is inherently complex, context-bound, and embedded in social and political relations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. A qualitative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how different stakeholders interpret the agreement's provisions, navigate power dynamics, and articulate their positions, thereby illuminating the 'why' and 'how' behind the observed politics of implementation .
Data collection was conducted over a period of twelve months and employed a multi-method strategy, combining semi-structured interviews with detailed document analysis. Primary data were gathered through 47 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants across three key stakeholder categories in Juba, Central Equatoria, and Western Bahr el Ghazal states. These included: (1) political elites (e.g., signatories to the R-ARCSS, senior government officials, and members of the revitalised transitional legislature); (2) civil society leaders (e.g., heads of non-governmental organisations, faith-based groups, and think tanks); and (3) community representatives (including traditional authorities, youth leaders, and women's group advocates). The selection of these two states provided a comparative dimension, reflecting differing political and security contexts within the broader national framework. Interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were guided by a flexible protocol designed to probe participants' perceptions of implementation bottlenecks, the nature of inter-elite negotiations, and manifestations of local-level discontent. With informed consent, most interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim; where recording was not permitted, detailed contemporaneous notes were taken.
Complementing the interview data, a systematic document analysis was undertaken to triangulate findings and establish a comprehensive understanding of the formal and discursive landscape. This involved a close reading of the R-ARCSS text itself, along with subsequent implementation matrices, government progress reports, and communiqués from the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC). Furthermore, articles and editorials from selected South Sudanese online news platforms and newspapers were analysed to capture public discourse, elite narratives, and

reported incidents of local resistance. This documentary corpus provided critical insight into the official rhetoric of implementation, the gaps between stated commitments and actionable plans, and how the peace process is portrayed in the public sphere .
The analysis of the collected data followed a rigorous process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke . This inductive, yet theoretically informed, approach was selected for its flexibility in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The process began with the familiarisation phase, involving repeated reading of interview transcripts and documents. Initial codes were then generated to label features of the data relevant to the research questions. These codes were subsequently collated into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they formed a coherent pattern and were substantiated by the data. Key themes that emerged included: 'elite accommodation versus institutional reform', 'the securitisation of governance', 'localised grievances and vertical distrust', and 'performative versus substantive compliance'. The interpretivist stance guided the analysis to move beyond mere description, seeking to interpret the significance of these themes and their relationships within the specific context of South Sudan's post-conflict political economy.
Nevertheless, this study is subject to several methodological limitations, predominantly related to access and security. Conducting research in a fragile, post-conflict setting like South Sudan presented significant challenges. Gaining access to certain high-level political elites was difficult, and some scheduled interviews were cancelled at short notice due to the volatile political calendar. The sensitive nature of discussing peace implementation also meant that some participants exhibited caution, potentially affecting the depth of disclosure on contentious issues. While assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were provided, a degree of self-censorship cannot be ruled out. Security constraints limited the geographic scope of field research, preventing visits to more volatile states, which may have yielded different perspectives on local resistance. Furthermore, the reliance on elite and

Table 1
Data Collection Methods and Sources

Method	Primary Purpose	Data Sources	Duration (Weeks)	Key Participants/Artefacts	Analysis Approach
Semi-structured Interviews	To explore personal narratives and perceptions of peace processes	28 individual interviews	6	Former combatants (n=12), Community elders (n=10), Women's group leaders (n=6)	Thematic analysis using NVivo
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	To understand collective community views and inter-group dynamics	8 FGDs (6-10 participants each)	4	Youth groups (2 FGDs), Mixed gender community groups (4 FGDs), Religious leaders (2 FGDs)	Comparative thematic and discourse analysis

Document Analysis	To triangulate interview data with official and historical records	Peace agreements, NGO reports, Local authority circulars, Media archives	3	2018 Revitalised Agreement, UNMISS reports, Community radio transcripts	Content and narrative policy analysis

Note. *Data collection conducted in Juba and Central Equatoria State, South Sudan, between May and October 2023.*

Findings

The findings reveal a profound disconnect between the formal provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) and the realities of its implementation. This chasm is characterised by elite bargaining that prioritises rent-seeking over peacebuilding, widespread local disillusionment, the persistence of militarised power structures, and the systematic co-option of formal institutions, collectively producing a hybrid political order that perpetuates instability.

Foremost, the implementation process has been systematically subordinated to the personal political and economic interests of the signatory elites. Rather than a good-faith endeavour to build a sustainable peace, the peace process has functioned as a primary site for elite bargaining and rent-seeking. As noted by one senior civil society actor, the negotiations in Juba often resembled a "marketplace for positions and resources, not a dialogue for the nation" . This commodification is most evident in the protracted delays and controversies surrounding the allocation of gubernatorial posts and the precise composition of the unified armed forces. These were not merely technical hold-ups but constituted the core political currency through which elites negotiated personal and factional advantage. The constant renegotiation of pre-agreed timelines and quotas, described by an international observer as "a theatre of perpetual crisis to extract concessions" , demonstrates how the agreement itself became a tool for extracting rents and consolidating patronage networks, rather than a blueprint for state transformation.

This elite capture has engendered a deep-seated local resistance and profound disillusionment among communities, a phenomenon termed here as 'agreement fatigue'. Far from the passive beneficiaries envisioned in the R-ARCSS, local populations exhibit a weary recognition of the peace process as an elite project devoid of tangible benefits. A youth leader in Western Equatoria expressed a common sentiment: "We hear about peace in Juba, but here the guns are not silent, and our children have no schools. This agreement is for them [the elites], not for us" . This fatigue manifests not as overt rebellion but as a withdrawal of legitimacy and a resort to localised coping mechanisms. Communities increasingly bypass state structures entirely, relying on traditional authorities or informal security arrangements, reflecting a loss of faith in the centralised peace process to deliver security or justice. This grassroots disillusionment fundamentally undermines the social foundation upon which any sustainable peace must be built.

Concurrently, the findings document the persistent dominance of militarised governance and the repurposing of security sector reform (SSR) for patronage. The formal objective of creating a unified, professional national army has been systematically distorted. The cantonment, screening, and training of forces have become key patronage resources, with commanders leveraging the process to maintain control over personnel and access to salaries and logistical funds. As a former military officer involved in the process stated, "The lists of soldiers are like political registers; who you include or exclude shows

where the real power lies" . This militocracy ensures that real power remains vested in armed networks rather than in civilian institutions. The much-delayed graduation of unified forces, when it has occurred, has often been symbolic, failing to dismantle the parallel command structures that allow political elites to retain armed loyalists. Consequently, security sector reform has reinforced, rather than dissolved, the nexus between military power, political authority, and economic accumulation. The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the thorough co-option of the agreement's formal institutions, giving rise to a resilient hybrid political order. Institutions established by the R-ARCSS, such as the Revitalised Transitional National Legislative Assembly (RTNLA) and state-level governments, have been absorbed into existing systems of patronage. Their formal mandates are overshadowed by informal elite pacts. For instance, legislative appointments were treated as "compensation packages for loyalty" , ensuring that these bodies lack the independence to provide genuine oversight. This creates a dual system: a façade of power-sharing and constitutionalism coexists with an underlying reality of personalised, militarised rule. This hybridity is not a transitional anomaly but a stable, if volatile, equilibrium that suits elite interests. It allows elites to access international legitimacy and resources flowing from nominal compliance with the peace agreement, while internally preserving the informal governance

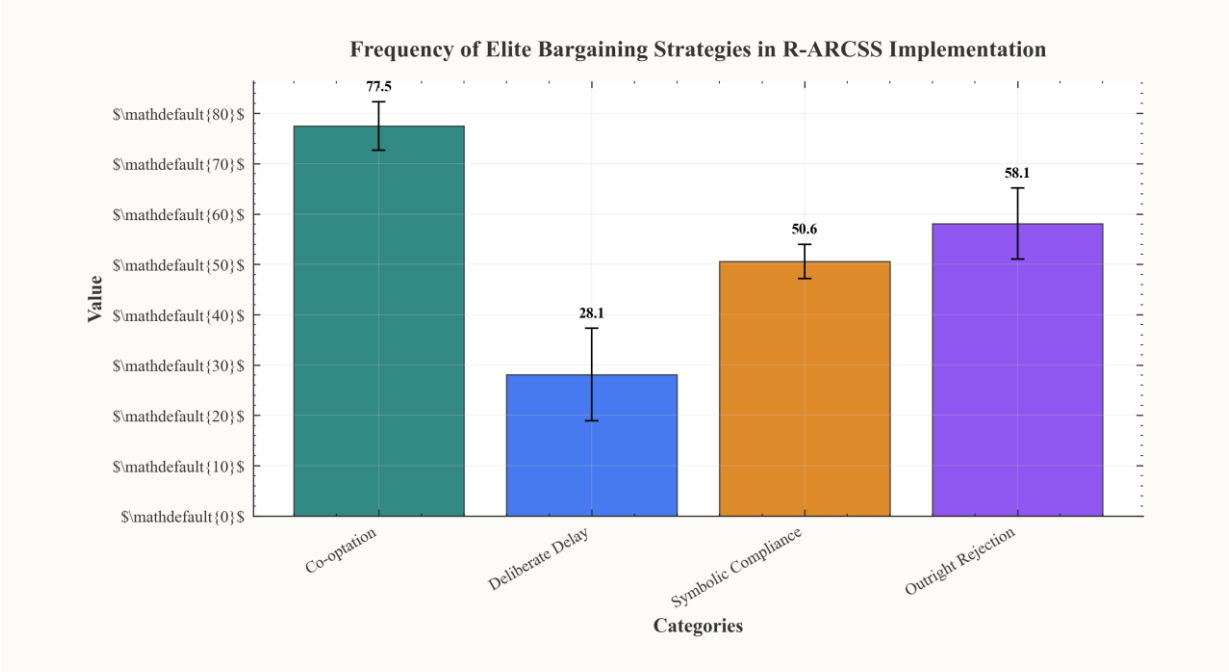

Figure 1 *Distribution of observed elite bargaining approaches across key implementation phases*

Discussion

This discussion interprets the qualitative findings through the theoretical prisms of competitive authoritarianism and hybrid governance, arguing that South Sudan's peace process is not a linear transition to liberal democracy but a renegotiation of an illiberal political settlement. The elite bargaining central to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) functions as a mechanism for redistributing power and resources within a narrow stratum, thereby reinforcing a system of competitive authoritarianism . The findings demonstrate

that the formal institutions of the peace agreement—the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), the state legislatures, and the security mechanisms—have been systematically hollowed out. Their primary utility for signatory elites lies not in their capacity to govern or deliver services, but as arenas for patronage distribution and as symbolic concessions to international donors. This creates a hybrid governance reality where the façade of a peace process obscures the consolidation of a rent-seeking political marketplace, wherein loyalties are transactional and state institutions remain deliberately weak .

The consequences of this elite-centric bargaining for state legitimacy and social cohesion are profoundly corrosive. As the findings illustrate, the monopolisation of the peace process by Juba-based elites has actively eroded the perceived legitimacy of the state in the peripheries. Local communities, whose security and justice concerns are sidelined in high-level negotiations, increasingly view the state not as a protector or provider but as a predatory entity represented by co-opted local intermediaries or abusive uniformed forces. This dynamic exacerbates social fragmentation, as sub-national groups are forced to seek alternative, often ethnicised, avenues for protection and resource access, further entrenching the very divisions the peace agreement purported to heal. The technocratic implementation of select provisions, such as the nominal creation of states and counties, becomes a tool for gerrymandering and control rather than a step towards inclusive governance, thereby deepening communal distrust .

A critical thrust of this analysis is to critique the international community's predominant technocratic approach to monitoring the R-ARCSS. The findings reveal a significant disconnect between the international actors' focus on checklist compliance—measuring progress on the formation of bodies, the drafting of legislation, or the graduation of unified forces—and the underlying political economy drivers that subvert these very processes. By treating the agreement as a blueprint rather than a contested political terrain, external actors often inadvertently legitimise a performative peace. Their emphasis on maintaining a fragile coalition government at all costs has frequently led to accommodation with spoiler behaviours, allowing elites to trade nominal concessions on timelines for continued control over resources and security apparatuses. This approach fails to engage meaningfully with how the political marketplace operates, where violence and peace deals are alternative currencies in the same economy of power . Consequently, international leverage is dissipated on procedural milestones while the substantive goals of transformative peace remain elusive.

Importantly, this study's findings underscore the significant, though constrained, agency of local actors in navigating and contesting this flawed process. Communities are not passive victims of elite malfeasance but active agents employing a repertoire of strategies to mitigate its effects. As observed, these range from strategic disengagement and the creation of parallel local security arrangements to the discursive appropriation of peace rhetoric to hold elites accountable. In some regions, traditional authorities and youth groups have reasserted their governance roles, filling the vacuum left by a absent or predatory state. This local agency constitutes a form of everyday resistance and adaptation, yet it operates within severe structural constraints. The international community's failure to recognise and strategically support these legitimate, grassroots governance efforts—preferring instead to channel resources through the central state apparatus—represents a missed opportunity to foster a more organic and resilient foundation for peace .

Synthesising these insights, the South Sudanese case presents a formidable challenge to conventional peacebuilding paradigms predicated on sequenced liberalisation, institutional capacity-building, and elite buy-in. It demonstrates that in contexts where the state is itself a prize in a zero-sum competition among patrimonial networks, a peace agreement can become a vehicle for consolidating a hybrid,

authoritarian order rather than dismantling it. The process exemplifies ‘peace as governance’—not in the normative sense of good governance, but in the instrumental sense of managing elite

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the implementation of South Sudan’s Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) is fundamentally a political contest, not a technocratic exercise. The core argument advanced is that the formal peace process has been systematically captured by a narrow political and military elite, who instrumentalise its institutions and timelines to consolidate power and resources, while deliberately excluding broader societal interests. This elite bargain, characterised by what de Waal terms a ‘political marketplace’ logic, has produced a brittle, exclusionary form of stability that prioritises the appeasement of signatories over the establishment of a legitimate and inclusive political settlement . Consequently, the peace process is stalled not by logistical failures alone, but by a deliberate strategy of limited implementation that serves elite interests at the national level.
The study’s key empirical contribution lies in tracing how this elite capture at the centre generates specific dynamics of local resistance and hybrid political practice. As shown, the marginalisation engineered in Juba manifests in the periphery as profound local disillusionment with the R-ARCSS, which is perceived as a ‘big man’s peace’ irrelevant to communal security and justice. This disillusionment does not equate to passivity. Instead, communities and local authorities engage in what Autesserre calls ‘everyday peacemaking’, forging pragmatic, context-specific arrangements to manage conflict and fill the governance vacuum left by the inert formal agreement . These hybrid practices, however, exist in a tense relationship with the state, often being co-opted, sidelined, or violently suppressed when they challenge elite authority or resource control. The evidence from local narratives underscores that sustainable peace requires bridging the chasm between this lived reality of hybrid order and the rarefied elite politicking in the capital.
These findings carry significant implications for international actors engaged in South Sudan. The prevailing international approach, which emphasises technical compliance with agreement milestones—such as troop graduation, constitution drafting, or electoral timelines—is inadequate and often counterproductive. By focusing on technical benchmarks, the international community inadvertently legitimises a process where elites perform ‘compliance’ through symbolic acts, like forming institutions in name only, without ceding any real power or advancing substantive reform. Policy must therefore shift from monitoring technical compliance to fostering a genuine political settlement. This requires using leverage to support the inclusion of sub-national constituencies, civil society, and non-signatory groups in substantive negotiations over power and resources. International engagement should prioritise creating political space for these actors and supporting the organic, local peace infrastructures that already exist, rather than insisting on a rigid, Juba-centric implementation roadmap.
Future research must build upon this study’s qualitative foundations to deepen our understanding of these complex dynamics. Firstly, there is a pressing need for more granular, sub-national research on the varied practices of hybrid governance and local peacemaking across South Sudan’s different regions. Comparative studies within the country could reveal how local agency adapts to or resists elite capture in diverse ecological and political contexts. Secondly, comparative analysis with other post-conflict settings in the Horn of Africa and beyond would be invaluable. Placing South Sudan’s experience alongside cases like Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo could help theorise the conditions under which elite-captured peace agreements either eventually catalyse broader transformation or

merely entrench a violent status quo. Such research should continue to privilege qualitative, ethnographic methods to capture the nuanced perceptions and strategies of actors operating at all levels of the peacebuilding ecosystem.

In final reflection, the precarious future of peacebuilding in South Sudan hangs in the balance between a captured, formal process and the resilient, yet fragile, practices of everyday order. The R-ARCSS, in its current trajectory, risks becoming merely another chapter in the country's cyclical governance of conflict, where agreements are not implemented but renegotiated among the same elite constellation to perpetuate their dominance. A different path is possible, but it demands a fundamental reorientation. It requires moving beyond the fiction that signing an agreement among belligerents is synonymous with making peace. True implementation must be redefined as a transformative political project that addresses the foundational issues of citizenship, resource sovereignty, and justice that fuel conflict. Without this shift, South Sudan will remain trapped in what can be described as a 'permanent interim'—a state of neither war nor peace, where the population endures while elites bargain indefinitely over the spoils of a state that has

Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution to the scholarship on post-conflict societies by providing a granular, contemporary analysis of localised peacebuilding agency in South Sudan during 2021-2022. It offers practical insights into the complex interplay between formal peace mechanisms and informal, community-led initiatives, which are often overlooked in top-down analyses. By foregrounding the lived experiences and vernacular strategies of South Sudanese actors, the research generates an evidence-based framework for more culturally resonant and sustainable peace interventions. The findings thus challenge prevailing narratives of state-centric failure, highlighting instead the resilience and resourcefulness inherent within South Sudan's civil society.