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PERSPECTIVE

Beyond the Revitalised Agreement

A Critical Perspective on the Political Economy of Stalemate in South Sudan

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)[1]

[1] *Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security; Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba; SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy*

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This perspective piece argues that the persistent fragility of South Sudan's peace process is fundamentally rooted in a political economy of conflict, where elite bargains supersede public interest. Moving beyond a technical assessment of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the analysis foregrounds how the logic of resource capture, militarised patronage networks, and subnational violence undermines institutional reform. It contends that the prevailing international peacebuilding paradigm, with its emphasis on top-down power-sharing, inadvertently entrenches a system of competitive kleptocracy. The article concludes by exploring the implications for a recalibrated approach that prioritises civic agency and economic justice as prerequisites for sustainable peace.

Keywords: *Political economy of conflict, Elite bargaining, Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS), Militarised patronage, Subnational violence, Competitive kleptocracy, Peacebuilding paradigms, Civic agency*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargains supersede public interest in South Sudan's peace process
- Power-sharing architecture reinforces predatory political marketplace
- International peacebuilding paradigms inadvertently entrench kleptocracy
- Civic agency and economic justice as prerequisites for sustainable peace

Core Argument

South Sudan's political stalemate is a functional outcome embedded within a distinctive political economy where peacemaking has been subsumed into elite resource distribution.

This perspective moves beyond technical assessments to examine systemic incentives sustaining the impasse.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, a culmination of a long and brutal struggle for self-determination. Yet, this hard-won sovereignty swiftly unravelled into a devastating civil war, plunging the nation into a cycle of violence, mass displacement, and acute humanitarian suffering that has defined much of its subsequent history. The international response to this protracted crisis has been characterised by a persistent, and arguably formulaic, investment in formal peacemaking, culminating most recently in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) of 2018. While this framework succeeded in silencing the most intense nationwide combat, it has yielded a condition of unstable peace—a political and security stalemate where violent conflict has been localised and contained rather than resolved, and where the implementation of the agreement's foundational provisions remains perpetually deferred . This article argues that the prevailing stagnation cannot be adequately understood as mere technical failure or a simple lack of political will. Instead, it posits that the stalemate is a functional outcome, deeply embedded within a distinctive political economy that has crystallised since independence. From this critical perspective, the formal peace process and the R-ARCSS itself are not merely solutions being imperfectly applied but are active elements within a system that incentivises the maintenance of a 'no war, no peace' equilibrium, serving the interests of a governing elite while failing to alter the fundamental drivers of conflict.

The central thesis advanced here is that South Sudan's political marketplace—where political loyalty is commodified and exchanged for access to state resources—has evolved to subsume peacemaking into its logic . The R-ARCSS, with its expansive power-sharing architecture and integration mechanisms, has effectively been harnessed as a primary mechanism for elite resource distribution and political accommodation, thereby reinforcing the very structures of predation and exclusion that precipitated the conflict. Consequently, the agreement's implementation is selectively pursued only insofar as it consolidates the positions of signatory elites, while transformative aspects pertaining to governance, justice, and security sector reform are systematically sidelined . This dynamic creates a self-perpetuating stalemate: the peace agreement provides the international legitimacy and financial sustenance necessary for regime survival, yet its full realisation would dismantle the patronage networks upon which that same regime depends. The result is a calculated inertia, where process substitutes for progress and the population remains trapped in a state of perpetual vulnerability.

This perspective piece will critically examine this political economy of stalemate, moving beyond a technocratic assessment of implementation delays to interrogate the systemic incentives that make the current impasse rational for key actors. The analysis proceeds in several parts. First, it will outline the contemporary landscape of the R-ARCSS, noting the formal milestones achieved against the backdrop of persistent insecurity and humanitarian need. It will then delve into the historical and structural foundations of South Sudan's political economy, tracing how the fusion of militarised politics with control over oil revenues and external rents has created a winner-takes-all system. Following this, the article will analyse how the peace agreement has been absorbed into this system, functioning as a vehicle for elite cartelisation rather than national transformation. A subsequent section will consider the international community's role as a reluctant financier of this stalemate, caught between humanitarian imperative and the unintended consequences of underwriting a flawed process. The conclusion will reflect on the implications of this analysis for future engagement with South Sudan, questioning whether conventional peacemaking paradigms can disrupt the entrenched logic of a militarised political

marketplace.

In setting this critical framework, the article aims to contribute to African Studies and Peace and Conflict scholarship by reframing the discussion on South Sudan from one of 'implementation gaps' to one of systemic functionality. It posits that understanding the peace process as an element of, rather than a solution to, the nation's political economy is essential for any realistic appraisal of the prospects for sustainable peace. With this theoretical orientation established, we now turn to examine the specific contours of the current landscape under the revitalised agreement.

Current Landscape

A decade after its independence and nearly six years since the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the country remains ensnared in a state of protracted stalemate. The formal architecture of the peace agreement is largely intact, with a Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) in place in Juba. However, the substantive implementation of its core provisions has been critically deficient, creating a façade of progress that masks a reality of persistent instability and institutional decay . This landscape is characterised by a dangerous divergence between political ceremonies in the capital and the lived experiences of most citizens, for whom violence, economic precarity, and political exclusion remain endemic.

The implementation of key R-ARCSS chapters has been markedly selective and instrumentalised. Critical security sector reforms, particularly the unification of forces, have been perpetually delayed, with cantonment sites plagued by desertions, inadequate resources, and a lack of political will to integrate command structures. This failure perpetuates the existence of parallel armies, sustaining a security landscape where formal and informal armed groups remain tools of political patronage rather than national institutions. Similarly, transitional justice mechanisms, including the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing and the Hybrid Court, have not been established. This impunity gap not only denies victims accountability but also reinforces a cycle of violence, sending a clear signal that political and military elites operate above the law .

Beyond Juba, inter- and intra-communal violence has become a self-sustaining feature of the landscape, often detached from the primary signatory factions. Conflicts in regions such as Jonglei, Warrap, and the Greater Equatoria are frequently framed in ethnic terms, yet are fundamentally driven by complex local political economies centred on cattle raiding, land disputes, and competition for authority. The state's absence or partisan intervention has allowed these conflicts to metastasise, with commercialised violence and the proliferation of small arms creating a market for insecurity that local elites exploit . This violence is not a mere spillover from national politics but a parallel system of governance and accumulation, demonstrating the limited reach and authority of the central government.

Natural resource governance, particularly the control of oil revenues and land, is a central node in this system of conflict. Oil wealth continues to flow directly to the centre, financing patronage networks and the security apparatus without delivering public goods or accountable governance. At the local level, competition over grazing land, water points, and mineral resources fuels communal strife. Elite actors at various levels are often implicated in these conflicts, leveraging them for economic gain and political leverage, thereby ensuring that resource competition remains a potent driver of instability rather than a foundation for development . The political economy of resources thus reinforces a zero-sum contest for control, undermining any collective national project.

Concurrently, the space for inclusive political dialogue and civic engagement has severely contracted. The peace process has primarily served to accommodate the interests of the main signatory armed groups, marginalising non-signatory movements, civil society organisations, and broader public opinion. Political dissent is often met with intimidation, and the media operates under significant constraints. This marginalisation excludes critical voices and alternative visions for the state from the political arena, ensuring that the R-ARCSS framework remains an elite bargain rather than a genuine social contract . The result is a peace that is narrow, exclusive, and inherently unstable. Therefore, the current landscape in South Sudan is not one of post-conflict recovery but of a formalised stalemate. The superficial adherence to the R-ARCSS timeline belies a reality where its transformative potential has been systematically hollowed out. Violence has become decentralised and economised, state institutions remain captured for elite benefit, and the majority of the population is excluded from both security and political representation. This stasis is not an accident but an outcome, necessitating a deeper examination of the underlying political economy that incentivises and sustains it.

Analysis and Argumentation

The prevailing interpretation of South Sudan's political impasse, centred on a fragile elite bargain, requires a critical deconstruction. This paper argues that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is not merely a faltering peace accord but the formal architecture for a sophisticated system of elite wealth accumulation and power preservation . The agreement's power-sharing formula, by allocating pre-defined shares of the state and its resources among competing factions, effectively institutionalises a political marketplace where loyalty is commodified and the state is the primary source of rent. This transforms peacebuilding from a process of resolving public grievances into a competitive negotiation over the division of spoils, where signing the agreement becomes a prerequisite for accessing the treasury. Consequently, the state is hollowed out, its institutions valued not for their public utility but as fiefdoms for extraction and patronage distribution.

This elite political economy is fundamentally sustained by militarised patronage networks, which actively subvert genuine state-building and security sector reform. The integration of various armed groups into unified national forces, a cornerstone of the R-ARCSS, is perpetually stalled not by logistical challenges alone, but because these militaries are the essential infrastructure of political finance and social control . Commanders function as political entrepreneurs, their authority derived from their ability to distribute resources to retain followers, not from a professional chain of command. Any meaningful unification and reform threatens this entire edifice by disconnecting military power from direct access to economic resources, thereby undermining the patronage logic that sustains the elite coalition. The resulting 'stalemate' is therefore a functional equilibrium for the elite, preserving a lucrative status quo under the guise of difficult implementation.

The international community's engagement, while ostensibly supporting peace, often inadvertently reinforces this system of elite capture through a technocratic and state-centric focus. Donors and peacebuilders prioritise the technical implementation of agreement timelines—cabinet formations, drafting legislation, training unified forces—while treating the underlying political marketplace as an exogenous disruption . This approach misdiagnoses the problem. By funnelling substantial resources through a state captured by these very elites to build its capacity, international actors provide the liquidity that fuels the patronage system, strengthening the hand of political entrepreneurs against

reformers . The peace process becomes a performance of compliance, where elites engage in ritualistic fulfilment of benchmarks to unlock further funds, which are then cycled into the networks that perpetuate instability. This depoliticised, checklist diplomacy fails to confront how the agreement itself has become the ultimate prize in a violent political competition.

A critical perspective must therefore shift the analytical lens from Juba-centric bargains to recognise the centrality of subnational political markets in conflict dynamics. The national elite pact does not pacify the country but often simply devolves conflict and accumulation to the local level. Governors, county commissioners, and local security actors operate their own political markets, contesting resources and authority in a complex interplay with the centre . Violence in the regions is frequently not a breakdown of the national agreement, but a manifestation of its logic: a struggle for position within subnational hierarchies of profit and power, which are sometimes ignited or manipulated by tensions in Juba. Ignoring this decentralised political economy leads to a fundamental misunderstanding of the drivers of local conflict and the limited reach of any capital-based compact.

Ultimately, this analysis reveals that the stalemate in South Sudan is not an absence of politics, but the manifestation of a particular, predatory political economic order. The R-ARCSS, rather than being a roadmap to a different future, currently serves as its charter. The perpetual cycle of crisis, negotiation, and renewed violence is a feature of this system, whereby elites manufacture and manage instability to justify their positions and continue the profitable business of dividing the state. Recognising this reality is the essential first step in moving beyond a revitalised agreement towards a more substantive engagement with the political economy of peace itself.

Implications and Outlook

The entrenched political economy of the stalemate, as analysed, carries profound implications for the international community's engagement and for the future trajectory of South Sudan itself. For donor governments and multilateral institutions, the primary implication is that a continued reliance on high-level political timelines and the ceremonial endorsement of power-sharing formulae is not merely insufficient but potentially counterproductive. As the analysis of elite cartel behaviour suggests, such approaches inadvertently subsidise the status quo by providing a veneer of legitimacy and a steady flow of resources without demanding transformative change. Effective conditionality must therefore move beyond calendar-based benchmarks to target the very structures of the political marketplace. This would entail linking substantial financial and diplomatic support to verifiable progress in dismantling parallel security budgets, establishing transparent and unified public financial management, and demonstrably ending the instrumentalisation of violence for economic gain. Donor policy must grapple with the uncomfortable reality that, as noted, the formal peace process often functions as a 'resource-allocation mechanism' for the elite, requiring a more confrontational stance towards its underlying economic drivers.

Given the resilience of the elite cartel, exploring alternative pathways for stability becomes imperative. One critical avenue is the deliberate fostering of economic diversification beyond the state-captured oil sector. While immensely challenging, supporting non-extractive sectors such as sustainable agriculture, livestock, and regional trade could begin to create economic constituencies less beholden to the patronage system. This must be intrinsically linked to meaningful youth inclusion. The current stalemate, which offers the majority of youth only the bleak choices of unemployment, predation, or being preyed upon, is a recipe for perpetual instability. Programmes focusing on education, vocational

training, and civic engagement are not mere development add-ons but essential investments in an alternative social contract. Creating economic alternatives outside the militarised patronage networks is a long-term but necessary project to reduce the pool of recruits for elite-sponsored violence and cultivate a citizenry with a stake in a functional state.

Concurrently, there is a compelling case for redirecting a portion of international and domestic energy towards supporting bottom-up, community-led peace infrastructures. The analysis of elite predation underscores that for many communities, the state is a source of insecurity rather than protection. In this vacuum, local peace agreements, customary authority structures, and civil society initiatives have often been the only bulwark against total collapse. These 'infrastructures for peace' possess a granular legitimacy that the Revitalised Agreement lacks. Donors and national policymakers should prioritise recognising, resourcing, and protecting these indigenous systems, not as a substitute for a national political settlement, but as essential, parallel foundations for social cohesion that can withstand the vagaries of elite politics. Strengthening community resilience is a vital hedge against the centrifugal forces exploited by the national elite.

The risks of failing to adopt such a multifaceted approach are severe. The most alarming prospect is the further fragmentation and regionalisation of the conflict. As the cartel's competition intensifies amidst dwindling resources, the incentive to mobilise sub-national ethnic militias and cultivate warlord fiefdoms will grow. This could precipitate the country's descent into a more chaotic, Libya-like scenario of proliferating armed factions, making any coherent national governance impossible. Furthermore, such fragmentation would inevitably draw in regional actors more deeply, as neighbouring states seek to secure their borders, influence proxy forces, or exploit South Sudan's resources. The current stalemate, therefore, is not a stable equilibrium but a precarious prelude to potential state disintegration, with dire humanitarian and security consequences for the entire Horn of Africa.

Ultimately, the outlook for South Sudan remains perilously contingent on whether internal and external actors can collectively alter the incentive structures that sustain the political economy of conflict. The path forward demands a sober recalibration of strategies that have, to date, proven inadequate. This involves donor policies courageous enough to impose meaningful conditionality, a sustained commitment to cultivating economic and social alternatives to militarised patronage, and a genuine partnership with the South Sudanese people by bolstering their community-level peacebuilding efforts. Without such a fundamental shift, the cycle of elite bargains, broken promises, and communal suffering is likely to persist, leaving the promise of independence and peace perpetually beyond reach.

Conclusion

This perspective has argued that the cyclical failure of peace agreements in South Sudan is not a mere technical or procedural shortcoming, but a structural outcome of a deeply entrenched political economy of conflict. The persistent stalemate, characterised by the recurrent collapse and revitalisation of elite bargains, is a feature, not a bug, of a system where governance is an extension of a militarised patronage network. As such, the prevailing international peacebuilding paradigm, which privileges elite power-sharing as the primary route to stability, is fundamentally misaligned with the realities on the ground. These arrangements, by design, serve to regulate and temporarily manage elite competition over the country's resources, rather than to transform the underlying systems that make violent contestation profitable. Consequently, the 'revitalised' agreement, like its predecessors, has consolidated a predatory peace, where a narrow political-military class is enriched while the citizenry remains impoverished and

insecure.

A durable peace, therefore, necessitates a deliberate and politically courageous project to dismantle this very political economy. This requires moving decisively beyond the elite-centric model that has dominated the peacemaking landscape. The international community and regional guarantors must recognise that facilitating another round of elite accommodation, without demanding substantive systemic change, is an exercise in conflict management that perpetuates the conditions for future violence. The focus must shift from merely integrating rival factions into the state apparatus to transforming the state itself from a vehicle for elite accumulation into an institution capable of delivering public goods and accountable governance. This entails a reimagined peacebuilding agenda that places economic justice and robust accountability at its core, rather than treating them as peripheral concerns.

Such an agenda would have several interlocking priorities. First, it must confront the architecture of impunity that shields the political marketplace's key actors. This involves genuine support for hybrid or domestic mechanisms for transitional justice, as called for by civil society, to address atrocities and break the cycle of violence without recourse. Second, peacebuilding must directly engage with the political economy of public finance. This means supporting transparent and accountable management of oil revenues and non-oil resources, dismantling the parallel, off-budget systems of finance that fuel militias and patronage, and prioritising the rebuilding of a professional, civilian civil service. Third, any future political settlement must be underpinned by a new social contract that addresses the legitimate grievances of South Sudan's diverse communities regarding land, resources, and local autonomy, moving beyond a purely Juba-centric negotiation.

Ultimately, forging a different future rests not with external actors or a reconciled elite, but with the agency of South Sudanese citizens themselves. The resilience of local peace processes, the advocacy of a vibrant though pressurised civil society, and the daily struggles of communities to survive amidst state predation are the foundational elements for a more legitimate and sustainable peace. The international community's role should be to create political and fiscal space for these actors, to amplify their demands for accountability, and to condition its support on demonstrable progress towards inclusive institution-building, rather than on the signing of documents that primarily serve to reconfigure elite power. The path beyond the current stalemate is undoubtedly fraught, but it begins with a clear-eyed rejection of the bankrupt logic that has equated peace with elite power-sharing. Only by dismantling the profitable economy of war and building a just economy of peace can South Sudan hope to break its tragic cycle of revitalised agreements and unrevitalised lives.

Contributions

This perspective piece makes a distinct contribution by analysing the contemporary implementation challenges of the Revitalised Peace Agreement from 2021 to 2024. It moves beyond evaluating formal structures to critically examine the lived realities of localised conflict and elite bargaining that continue to undermine the peace process. The analysis provides a timely, grounded framework for scholars and practitioners to reinterpret the interplay between national-level politics and sub-national violence. Consequently, it offers a more nuanced diagnostic tool for assessing the prospects for sustainable peace in the current political climate.