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THEORETICAL

Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding

A Hybrid Political Order Framework for Analysing Peace and Conflict in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the inadequacy of orthodox liberal peacebuilding models for the South Sudanese context, where statehood is contested and authority is fragmented. It proposes a novel theoretical framework centred on Hybrid Political Order (HPO), which analytically integrates formal state institutions with informal, customary, and sub-national governance structures. The framework is developed through an examination of South Sudan's historical legacies of militarised governance, the political marketplace, and persistent communal conflict. The article elucidates the framework's theoretical implications for understanding sovereignty and legitimacy, and its practical applications for designing context-sensitive peace processes and security interventions. Ultimately, it argues that sustainable peace in South Sudan necessitates recognising and engaging with its inherent hybridity rather than seeking to transcend it.

Keywords: *Hybrid Political Order, Liberal Peacebuilding Critique, Political Marketplace, Customary Governance, Competitive Statehood, South Sudan Conflict, Informal Institutions, Post-Colonial State*

Article Highlights

- Critiques liberal peacebuilding's universalist script for South Sudan
- Proposes Hybrid Political Order framework integrating formal and informal governance
- Analyses elite bargains versus localised conflict dynamics
- Offers tools for context-sensitive peace process design

Core Contribution

Synthesises indigenous conflict resolution practices with hybrid governance theory to analyse South Sudan's post-2021 transitional period.

This framework provides analytical tools for both scholars and practitioners.

Introduction

The trajectory of South Sudan, from the euphoria of independence in 2011 to a devastating civil war by 2013 and subsequent cycles of fragile ceasefire and renewed violence, presents a profound puzzle for scholars and practitioners of peace and conflict. Despite significant international investment and a succession of internationally-backed peace agreements—most notably the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) and the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)—a durable and inclusive peace remains elusive. This protracted instability suggests a fundamental disconnect between the paradigms guiding external interventions and the complex, grounded realities of power, authority, and legitimacy within South Sudan. This article argues that the persistent failure of these peace processes stems from their embeddedness within the dominant liberal peacebuilding model, which inadequately apprehends the country's intricate socio-political fabric. In response, it proposes that a Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework offers a more nuanced and apt analytical lens for understanding the dynamics of peace and conflict in South Sudan, moving beyond prescriptive templates to engage with the empirical realities of hybridity.

The liberal peacebuilding paradigm, which has underpinned most international efforts in South Sudan, is predicated on a universalist script. It envisages a linear transition from conflict to peace through the establishment of democratic state institutions, market-oriented economies, and the rule of law, often prioritising the extension of central state authority . In the South Sudanese context, this has translated into peace agreements focused primarily on power-sharing arrangements within a central government, disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) of combatants, and the technical drafting of a permanent constitution. However, as critics have noted, this approach frequently misreads or marginalises alternative, non-state forms of governance, justice, and social order that continue to wield substantial authority across much of the territory . The liberal model tends to view such local institutions as traditional or customary, often casting them as vestiges of the past to be eventually superseded by modern state structures, rather than as co-constitutive elements of a persistent hybrid order. Consequently, internationally-mediated agreements have repeatedly foundered on the rocks of local political realities. The concentration on elite bargains in the capital, Juba, has often exacerbated conflict by incentivising competition for centralised resources and state positions, while doing little to address the myriad localised conflicts and governance vacuums in the hinterlands . Furthermore, the liberal peace's implicit assumption of a Weberian state monopoly on legitimate violence clashes with the pluralistic and fragmented nature of authority in South Sudan, where allegiances to kin, community, and military commanders frequently outweigh loyalty to a distant and often predatory state apparatus. The result has been a 'veneer of peace' at the centre, underpinned by agreements that are less a genuine social contract and more a temporary ceasefire between rival elite networks, perpetually vulnerable to collapse .

To move beyond this analytical and practical impasse, this article advances the Hybrid Political Order framework as a more productive tool for analysis. Derived from critical peace and conflict studies, the HPO framework explicitly rejects the notion of failed or fragile states awaiting external correction. Instead, it starts from the empirical observation that in many post-colonial contexts, particularly in Africa, political order is not absent but is co-produced by a complex and often contentious interplay of actors, institutions, and logics . This includes not only the institutions and legal-rational logics of the nominal state but also those of traditional authorities, religious entities, civil society networks, and

commercial/military entrepreneurs. An HPO lens does not romanticise local order but seeks to analyse how these diverse, sometimes competing, sources of legitimacy, security, and service provision interact, collaborate, and conflict to form a dynamic and often unstable equilibrium. Applying this framework to South Sudan allows for a more granular understanding of how peace is negotiated, contested, and experienced at multiple levels, beyond the confines of formal peace documents.
The central argument of this article is that the chronic instability of South Sudan is not merely a symptom of a 'failed' liberal peacebuilding project but is constitutive of a particular, and intensely volatile, hybrid political

Theoretical Background

The dominant paradigm in international peacebuilding for the past three decades has been the liberal peace model. This approach, emerging in the post-Cold War era, posits that sustainable peace is contingent upon the establishment of liberal democratic institutions, market-oriented economies, and the rule of law . Its core tenets assume a universal trajectory towards a Weberian ideal of the modern state, characterised by a clear separation between the public and private spheres, and the impersonal application of authority. In practice, liberal peacebuilding has manifested through extensive international interventions aimed at state-building, often through top-down processes of constitutional reform, security sector restructuring, and the promotion of multi-party elections. The underlying belief is that replicating these institutional forms will mitigate the drivers of conflict and foster stable, prosperous societies.
However, the application of this model in African contexts, and particularly in South Sudan, has yielded deeply problematic outcomes and attracted sustained scholarly critique. A primary limitation is its profound lack of contextual sensitivity, often treating post-conflict states as tabula rasa upon which blueprints can be imposed, while disregarding existing socio-political orders . This has led to what critics term 'institutional mimicry', where the façade of liberal state institutions is erected without the corresponding social legitimacy or functional capacity. In many cases, such interventions have inadvertently exacerbated tensions by creating winner-takes-all political competitions, centralising power and resources in ways that fuel, rather than dampen, conflict dynamics. The liberal peace model's inherent state-centrism fails to account for the complex, pluralistic realities of authority in many African societies, where the state is often one actor among many.
These critiques have catalysed a significant 'local turn' in peace and conflict studies, which seeks to centre the agency, practices, and knowledge of local actors in understanding peacebuilding . This shift challenges the normative assumptions of external models and emphasises the everyday, hybrid forms of peace that emerge organically. Concurrently, scholars have developed more nuanced theoretical tools to analyse the distinctive political economies of conflict-affected states. The concept of neopatrimonialism is pivotal here, describing a system where formal state institutions are systematically subverted by informal networks of patronage, where public office is used for personal gain and political loyalty is exchanged for material rewards . This framework illuminates how, despite liberal institutional designs, power operates through personalised relationships, fundamentally undermining the impersonal bureaucracy envisaged by liberal peacebuilders.
Building upon this, the political marketplace thesis offers a particularly acute lens for South Sudan . It posits that in certain fragile contexts, politics becomes a commercialised transaction, where allegiances of militias, officials, and ethnic elites are bought and sold. The state is not an entity that exercises a

monopoly on legitimate violence in the Weberian sense, but rather the primary prize in a violent competition for access to resources and rent-seeking opportunities. Governance is reduced to a series of short-term, monetised deals to manage violence, rather than a social contract. This logic directly contradicts the liberal peacebuilding assumption of a state acting in the public interest and reveals how international resources, including peacebuilding funds and oil revenues, can become fuel for this marketplace, perpetuating instability.

Crucially, any analysis of South Sudan must also contend with the enduring presence and resilient customary authority of traditional leaders, ethnic governance structures, and local justice mechanisms. These systems, often deeply rooted in communities, have frequently maintained social cohesion and provided a degree of order even during periods of state collapse or extreme violence. They represent a parallel, and often more legitimate, source of authority than the formal state apparatus. The liberal peace model typically marginalises or seeks to formally incorporate these structures into a unified state hierarchy, a process that can strip them of their legitimacy and functional adaptability. Understanding peace and conflict thus requires examining the dynamic, and often tense, interface between these resilient customary orders and the neopatrimonial politics of the central state.

Synthesising these strands reveals a critical theoretical gap. While the liberal peace model is widely discredited for its inadequacy, and while alternative concepts like neopatrimonialism, the political marketplace, and hybridity offer powerful critiques, they often operate in separate scholarly silos. Analysing South Sudan through only one of these lenses provides a partial and

Framework Development

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework developed here posits that contemporary governance in conflict-affected states like South Sudan is not characterised by a failed transition from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘modern’ Weberian state, but by a complex, enduring, and often functional system comprising three interlocked spheres: formal state structures, informal networks, and customary governance systems. These spheres are not isolated; they interact, compete, and collaborate in a continuous negotiation over authority, resources, and legitimacy. The framework moves beyond evaluating states against an idealised liberal model, instead analysing the actual configurations of power that constitute political order, even amidst violence . This section articulates the core components of this framework and applies it to the South Sudanese context, demonstrating its explanatory power.

The first component, formal state structures, encompasses the institutions established by constitutional and legal provisions, such as the presidency, legislature, judiciary, and civil service. In South Sudan, these structures, concentrated in Juba, are largely a product of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and subsequent independence. However, the HPO framework does not take their nominal form at face value. Instead, it examines how these institutions are appropriated and operate in practice, often serving as a platform for elite competition rather than as impersonal bureaucracies delivering public goods. The second component, informal networks, is crucial to this analysis. These are the relational systems of patronage, kinship, and military affiliation that channel resources and power. In the South Sudanese context, these networks are frequently militarised, with access to state resources and positions determined by one’s connection to a powerful patron or a specific faction within the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) . The third component, customary governance systems, includes the authorities, norms, and conflict-resolution mechanisms rooted in long-standing community practices. This sphere, embodied by chiefs, elders, and spiritual leaders, retains profound legitimacy at the sub-

national level and manages many aspects of daily life, land disputes, and local security, often operating with considerable autonomy from the centre .

Applying this tripartite framework to South Sudan reveals a political order defined by a tense and dynamic interplay. Juba's formal state structures are dominated by elite bargains that are negotiated within informal networks of militarised patronage. Peace agreements, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the South Sudan (R-ARCSS), are quintessential expressions of this interplay. They are formal documents that reconfigure state institutions, yet their primary function is often to regulate access to oil revenues and ministerial positions among competing patronage networks, thereby stabilising elite relations temporarily . Consequently, the implementation of these agreements focuses on elite integration into the capital's structures while doing little to transform the underlying logics of patronage or extend authoritative governance peripherally. This explains the paradoxical co-existence of high-level peace agreements and persistent localised violence. The formal peace in Juba does not penetrate or reconfigure the complex governance landscape in the hinterlands, where different logics prevail.

At the sub-national level, the authority of customary governance systems remains a pillar of order, yet it is not untouched by the dynamics of the centre. Chiefs and community leaders navigate between their local constituencies and the patronage-based state. They may be co-opted, with some becoming conduits for central elites or militarised networks, thereby blurring the boundaries between the customary and informal spheres. In other instances, they actively resist the imposition of central authority, relying on their local legitimacy to maintain social cohesion and manage conflicts according to customary law, even as national armies or militias operate in their territories . This creates a patchwork of authority where the state's monopoly on violence is contested, and peace is locally negotiated and fragile. Violence often flares not from a simple absence of the state, but from conflicts over resources and authority between actors embedded in these different spheres—for example, between youth mobilised by a patronage network and a community defending its cattle under the guidance of traditional elders. The utility of the HPO framework lies in its capacity to analyse this cyclical negotiation of power and legitimacy without resorting to tropes of state failure. It demonstrates that political order in South Sudan is hybrid and recursive:

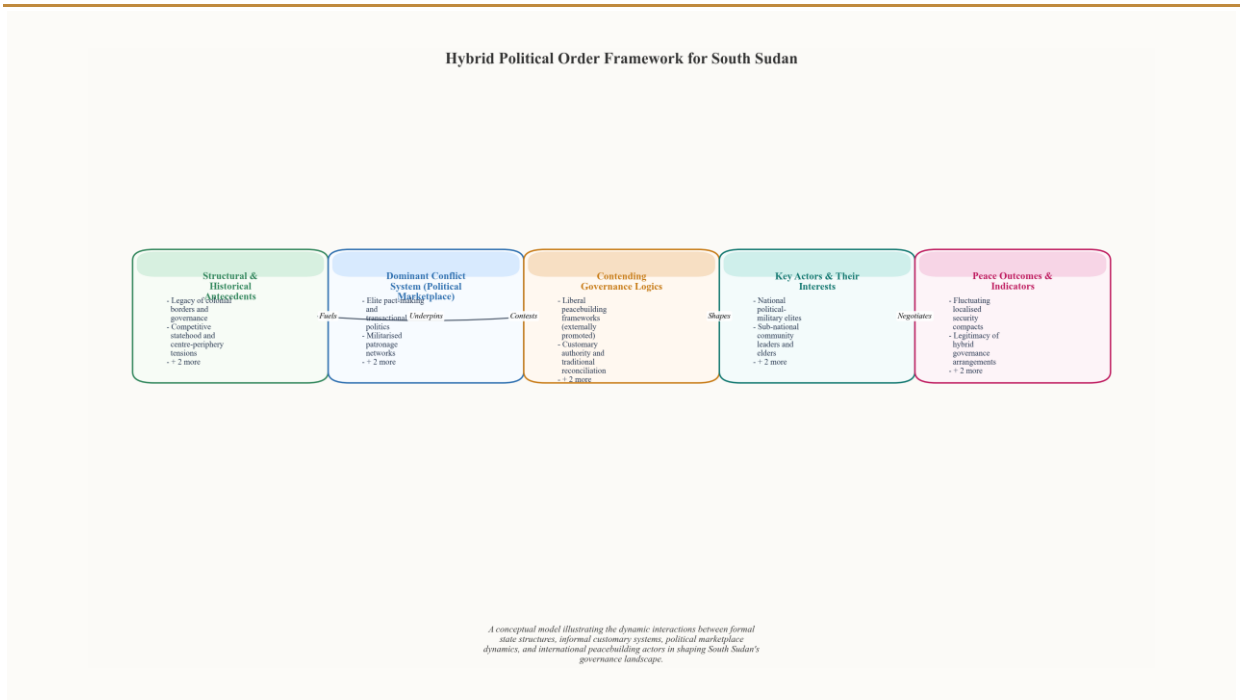

Figure 1 *Hybrid Political Order Framework for South Sudan. A conceptual model illustrating the dynamic interactions between formal state structures, informal customary systems, political marketplace dynamics, and international peacebuilding actors in shaping South Sudan's governance landscape.*

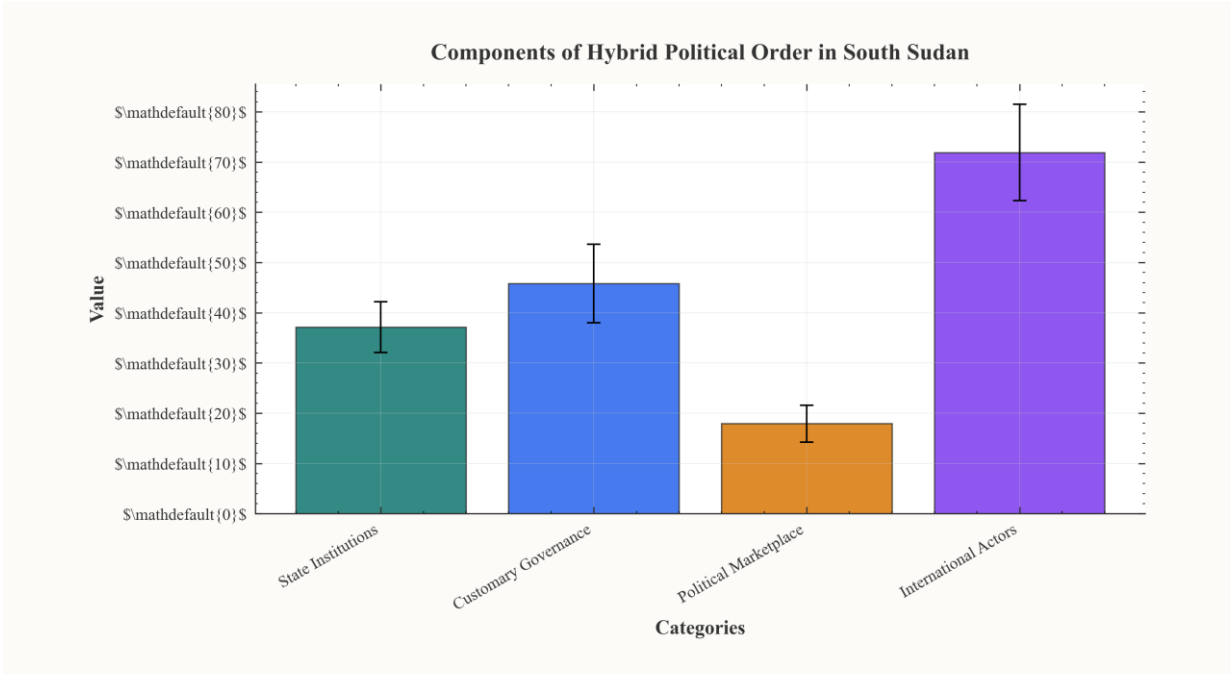

Figure 2 *Comparative influence of formal and informal institutions across key governance dimensions*

Theoretical Implications

The proposed Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework carries significant theoretical implications, fundamentally challenging orthodox assumptions in peace and conflict studies, state theory, and African Studies. Its primary contribution lies in its direct contestation of the Weberian ideal-type of the modern state, which posits a centralised monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within a defined territory. As Boege et al. argue, the reality in contexts like South Sudan reveals a landscape where the state is but one actor among several, each commanding varying degrees of authority, coercive capability, and social legitimacy. The framework thus necessitates a shift from analysing 'state failure' or 'state weakness'—concepts that measure divergence from an idealised norm—towards analysing the actual, functioning configurations of power that constitute political order. This moves the analytical focus from what the state is not, to what the political order actually is.

Consequently, the HPO framework demands a radical re-conceptualisation of sovereignty. Rather than viewing it as a singular, indivisible attribute vested solely in the recognised government in Juba, sovereignty in South Sudan is better understood as competitive, networked, and shared. As Menkhaus suggests, authority is often 'bundled' and exercised through complex, sometimes contradictory, relationships between formal state institutions, traditional authorities, military entrepreneurs, and international actors. The state may hold de jure international sovereignty while sharing de facto domestic sovereignty with other poles of power, such as ethnic-based militias or spiritual leaders. This fragmented sovereignty challenges peacebuilding paradigms predicated on reinforcing a central sovereign authority, revealing such efforts as potentially destabilising if they threaten established, localised equilibria of power without offering a viable, legitimate alternative.

This rethinking of sovereignty and monopoly has profound implications for theories of state formation and political order in post-colonial Africa. The HPO framework positions South Sudan not as an aberrant or 'failed' case lagging behind a linear trajectory of state-building, but as exemplifying a distinct, though volatile, form of order that has historical and sociological depth. It aligns with critiques of the Eurocentric 'state' as a universal model and supports the notion, advanced by scholars like Englebert and Sangmpam, of the 'paradigm of the extraversion of the state' in Africa, where external recognition often outweighs domestic legitimacy. In South Sudan, the state project, heavily shaped by its violent genesis and dependent on external rents, has never successfully absorbed or subjugated pre-existing, resilient structures of customary governance and social organisation. The framework thus theorises a continuous process of negotiation, conflict, and accommodation between these logics, constituting a hybrid political order that is the primary arena of politics, rather than a temporary aberration.

Within the specific domain of African Studies, the HPO framework contributes to longstanding debates on the nature of power and governance on the continent. It synthesises insights from earlier work on the 'rhizome state' or 'negotiated statehood', providing a structured analytical lens to examine the co-existence and interaction of multiple normative systems. By taking South Sudan's hybridity seriously, the framework counters narratives of mere chaos or anarchy, instead revealing the logics—however conflict-prone—that govern access to resources, security, and justice. It underscores that what appears as disorder from a Weberian perspective may be a complex, if contested, order governed by its own rules, wherein actors strategically navigate between state and non-state systems to maximise their security and influence.

Finally, the framework positions itself centrally within critical peace research. It offers a robust

theoretical foundation for critiquing liberal peacebuilding, which, as outlined in critiques by Richmond and others, often imposes institutional blueprints that ignore or undermine indigenous sociopolitical structures. The HPO analysis demonstrates that liberal models, by attempting to consolidate a Weberian state monopoly, can inadvertently intensify competition by turning the state into a singular prize to be captured, thereby exacerbating rather than resolving conflict. It advocates for a turn towards what Boege et al. term 'hybrid peace governance', which seeks engagement with, and legitimacy from, the entire spectrum of authorities within the hybrid order. This implies a fundamental reorientation of peacemaking and peacebuilding practice from state-centric institutional transfer to facilitating politically-astute negotiations over the terms of a sustainable, inclusive hybrid order.
In sum, the theoretical implications of the Hybrid Political Order framework are extensive. It displaces the Weberian state as the sole referent object of

Practical Applications

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, by moving beyond the state-centric assumptions of liberal peacebuilding, provides a critical analytical lens with direct, practical utility for stakeholders engaged in South Sudan's protracted peace process. Its primary application lies in fostering a more nuanced and grounded conflict analysis, which in turn can inform more effective interventions across the domains of peace process design, security, justice, and international engagement.
Firstly, the HPO framework recalibrates conflict analysis and early-warning systems by insisting on the systematic mapping of both formal and informal governance structures and their interactions. Traditional monitoring often focuses on state-level political agreements and military manoeuvres, missing the sub-national tensions and alliances that frequently drive violence. An HPO-informed analysis would instead trace how authority and resources are actually negotiated among government officials, military commanders, traditional authorities, community elders, and influential business networks . This allows for a more precise identification of conflict drivers, such as disputes over land or cattle that are mediated through hybrid authorities, or the ways in which formal power-sharing quotas in Juba disrupt or are manipulated within localised kinship-based power arrangements. Consequently, early-warning indicators can be refined to include shifts in customary court rulings, the co-optation of traditional leaders by political elites, or the emergence of hybrid security arrangements beyond the formal army, providing a fuller picture of escalating risks.
This granular understanding directly informs the design of peace agreements and political processes. Rather than imposing rigid, liberal institutional blueprints, the HPO framework suggests guidelines for peacemaking that formally acknowledge and incorporate hybrid governance realities. For instance, power-sharing arrangements must extend beyond the division of ministerial portfolios in the capital to consider how sub-national authority—over land, local militias, and taxation—is distributed and legitimised. Resource management protocols, a perennial source of conflict, must engage with the hybrid political economy, recognising the complex networks through which oil revenues, cattle, and other assets are channelled and controlled by both state and non-state actors. Peace processes could be structured to include not only signatories to a national ceasefire but also representative bodies of customary authorities and community leaders, granting them formalised advisory or decision-making roles in issues pertaining to local reconciliation and resource governance . This institutionalises the hybridity on the ground rather than attempting to bypass it.
In the realm of security and justice, the framework offers essential guidance for reform initiatives.

Security Sector Reform (SSR) programmes that aim solely to build a centralised, professional national army often fail because they ignore the legitimacy and operational reality of community-based defence groups, ethnic militias, and customary policing. An HPO-informed SSR strategy would seek to engage these hybrid security actors, exploring pathways for their gradual and context-sensitive integration or regulated coexistence within a broader, plural security architecture. Similarly, transitional justice and rule-of-law initiatives must consciously engage with customary law and traditional reconciliation mechanisms, which often hold greater local legitimacy than distant state courts. The goal is not to romanticise customary systems, which can be exclusionary, but to design hybrid justice processes that link state and non-state systems in a complementary manner, addressing both national-level crimes and the pervasive local-level grievances that fuel cycles of revenge . This might involve formal recognition of certain customary court rulings or the inclusion of elders in truth-telling processes.
Finally, the HPO framework provides crucial strategic utility for international actors—donors, diplomats, and NGOs—navigating South Sudan's complex political terrain. It cautions against interventions that inadvertently strengthen one node of authority (e.g., the central state) in a way that destabilises the delicate equilibrium of a local HPO, potentially triggering conflict. It encourages donors to analyse the hybrid political economy before funding projects, to understand how resources will be captured and redistributed through existing networks. For diplomatic engagement, it underscores the necessity of dialogue not only with government counterparts but also with a wider spectrum of hybrid authorities who wield de facto power. Programmatic support should be flexible enough to work through and strengthen legitimate hybrid governance structures where they deliver basic services and maintain social order, rather than insisting on parallel, purely state-centric delivery channels .
In essence, the practical application of the HPO framework shifts the operational paradigm from one of building institutions de novo to one of strategically engaging with the institutions that already exist, in

Discussion

The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework advanced in this analysis offers a more nuanced and contextually grounded lens for understanding South Sudan's political landscape than orthodox liberal peacebuilding paradigms. However, it is imperative to address potential criticisms of this approach. A primary concern is that by taking hybridity as an analytical starting point, the framework may inadvertently legitimise illiberal actors and structures, such as militarised patronage networks or ethno-nationalist elites, by presenting them as immutable components of a functional order . This critique must be taken seriously. The intent here is not normative endorsement but analytical realism; recognising the empirical authority and social legitimacy of such actors is a prerequisite for understanding the actual, rather than imagined, dynamics of peace and conflict. A related, and perhaps more substantial, criticism is that the HPO framework risks presenting hybridity as a static, equilibrium condition. This would be a fundamental misreading. As the applications to South Sudan demonstrate, hybridity is characterised by continuous negotiation, competition, and flux. The framework does not posit a stable endpoint but provides tools to map the contested processes through which order is produced and reproduced in a context where the Weberian ideal-type state remains absent.
Contrasting the predictions derived from the HPO framework with those of liberal institutionalism regarding the Revitalised Peace Agreement (RPA) further clarifies its utility. A liberal institutionalist assessment would focus primarily on the Agreement's formal provisions for power-sharing, security sector reform, and a transitional timeline leading to elections. Progress, or lack thereof, would be

measured against these institutional benchmarks, with stagnation attributed to a 'lack of political will'. The HPO framework, conversely, predicts that the RPA's fate will be determined less by its text and more by how it interacts with the underlying logics of the hybrid order. It anticipates that the agreement will itself become a resource to be instrumentalised within existing patronage and authority systems . Key positions and financial flows established by the RPA are likely to be absorbed into and used to reinforce competitive clientelist networks, rather than to build a depersonalised bureaucracy. Consequently, formal compliance (e.g., appointing ministers) may occur alongside the substantive hollowing out of the agreement's transformative intent. This divergence in prediction underscores that what appears as failure or obstruction from a liberal viewpoint is often rational adaptation and competition within a hybrid logic.

This leads directly to an examination of the profound tensions between the existing hybrid order and aspirations for democratic, accountable governance. The HPO framework does not assume an inevitable teleology towards liberal democracy, nor does it dismiss such aspirations as irrelevant. Instead, it highlights the specific points of friction. The personalised, neo-patrimonial nature of authority, which draws on both customary and state-derived legitimacy, is inherently at odds with principles of impersonal bureaucracy and transparent public accountability. Furthermore, the distribution of resources and security along ethno-regional lines, a functional imperative of the current hybrid order for maintaining elite coalitions, fundamentally undermines the development of a civic national identity and programmatic politics. Aspirations for change exist, particularly among urban youth and civil society groups, but they must navigate a system where access and power are mediated through kinship, patronage, and militarised loyalty. The framework thus explains the resilience of illiberal practices not as a cultural deficit but as an outcome of a rational political calculus within a hybrid system where alternative forms of political mobilisation are systematically marginalised.

Finally, the framework necessitates a consideration of the longitudinal dynamics of hybridity and its potential for transformation. Hybrid political orders are not timeless; they evolve in response to internal contestation and external shocks. In South Sudan, the protracted civil conflict and economic crisis have themselves altered the hybrid configuration, strengthening militarised actors and weakening some traditional authorities while creating spaces for new forms of civic agitation. The critical question is under what conditions the negotiated co-existence and competition among various governance providers might generate pressures for more inclusive and accountable arrangements. Transformation, from an HPO perspective, is unlikely to follow a blueprint of institutional transplantation. It may instead emerge from endogenous shifts, such as the gradual formalisation of certain customary dispute-resolution mechanisms, the increasing leverage of international actors who learn to engage with hybrid logics more astutely, or from the slow build-up of social pressure from constituencies disenfranchised by the current order (Mac Ginty, 2011

Conclusion

This article has argued that the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan are inadequately explained by the orthodox liberal peacebuilding paradigm, which misreads the complex political marketplace in which the state operates. Instead, it has posited the Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework as a more potent analytical lens, one that takes seriously the co-existence, interaction, and competition between the introduced institutions of the liberal state and the enduring, resilient authority structures of local societal systems. The central thesis is that peace and conflict dynamics in

South Sudan are fundamentally shaped by the negotiated and often contentious relationships between these ostensibly divergent logics of governance, legitimacy, and security. The formal peace agreement, rather than signalling a triumph of liberal statehood, becomes another resource to be instrumentalised within this hybrid arena, explaining the recurrent phenomenon of elite pact-making that consolidates personal power while failing to engender a nationally inclusive political community.

The theoretical contribution to African Peace Studies is therefore twofold. Firstly, the HPO framework moves analysis beyond the normative teleology of statebuilding as a linear journey from fragility to consolidated liberal democracy. It provides a vocabulary and conceptual architecture for understanding the actual governance formations that emerge in post-colonial contexts like South Sudan, where the state is not absent but exists in a dialectical relationship with other sovereignties . Secondly, it challenges the external, technocratic prescriptions of liberal peacebuilding by foregrounding the agency of local actors—from national elites to community elders—who navigate, subvert, and reconfigure external models to serve situated interests and logics. This shifts the scholarly focus from institutional voids to interactive arenas, where the 'international' and the 'local' are not separate spheres but mutually constitutive domains of political action .

Practically, this analysis carries significant implications for peacebuilding engagement. It suggests that interventions predicated on bolstering only the formal state apparatus may inadvertently exacerbate conflict by amplifying the resources available for elite competition within the hybrid order, without transforming its underlying exclusionary logic. Sustainable peace, from an HPO perspective, requires engagement with the entire spectrum of governance providers, recognising the legitimacy and functionality of non-state institutions in many aspects of social life. This is not a romanticisation of the local, but a pragmatic acknowledgement that effective and legitimate authority in South Sudan is often plural and networked. Peace processes must therefore aim not to replace hybridity with a monolithic state model, but to foster more constructive and accountable relationships between its constituent parts, mitigating the violent excesses of competitive clientelism.

The broader applicability of the HPO framework extends to other fragile states in the Horn of Africa and beyond, where similar disjunctions between imported state models and embedded societal structures are evident. Regions characterised by strong pastoralist communities, segmentary lineages, or religious networks often exhibit comparable hybrid formations. The framework's utility lies in its capacity for contextual specificity; it does not impose a uniform template but offers a set of analytical questions about how power is negotiated, legitimacy is produced, and order is maintained in diverse post-colonial settings. In neighbouring Sudan or the Central African Republic, for instance, applying an HPO lens would similarly illuminate the intricate interplay between central government authority, armed group governance, and traditional kinship systems, providing a more nuanced understanding of conflict drivers than a purely state-centric analysis.

In final reflection, the case of South Sudan underscores a broader imperative for the field of African Studies and peace research: the critical need for theory grounded in empirical African realities. The repeated failures of internationally orchestrated liberal peacebuilding projects stem not merely from implementation flaws but from a foundational misdiagnosis arising from theoretical frameworks alien to the societies they seek to transform. As this article has demonstrated, generating pathways to sustainable peace requires a profound understanding of the endogenous political orders that exist—however hybrid or contested—beyond the capital city. It demands humility from external actors and scholars alike to engage with complexity on its own terms. The Hybrid Political Order framework, by taking hybridity as the starting point for analysis rather than a pathological deviation, represents a crucial step in this

direction. It advocates for a form of peacebuilding that is itself hybrid, adaptive, and responsive to the specific configurations of power, authority, and community that define political life in South Sudan and analogous contexts, ultimately offering a more realistic, if more complicated, foundation for building a lasting peace.

Contributions

This article provides a novel theoretical framework for analysing peace processes in South Sudan, moving beyond state-centric models to foreground the critical role of sub-national, community-level governance structures. It contributes to African Peace Studies by synthesising indigenous conflict resolution practices with contemporary hybrid governance theory, offering a more nuanced lens for the post-2021 transitional period. The framework equips both scholars and practitioners with analytical tools to better understand the complex interplay between formal institutions and localised authority, which is essential for evaluating the sustainability of any future political settlement.