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THEORETICAL

# Beyond Liberal Peacebuilding

*A Hybrid Political Order Framework for Analysing Peace Processes in South Sudan*

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### ABSTRACT

This article critiques the limitations of orthodox liberal peacebuilding models in the context of South Sudan's protracted conflict. It argues that the persistent cycles of violence and fragile peace agreements stem from a fundamental misalignment between imported institutional frameworks and the country's entrenched socio-political realities, characterised by competitive multi-level governance, neo-patrimonial authority, and complex identity formations. The article develops a novel theoretical framework synthesising concepts of Hybrid Political Orders, Political Marketplace theory, and Legitimacy Formation to provide a more nuanced analytical tool. This integrated framework is then applied to deconstruct key provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), revealing the dynamic interplay between formal and informal institutions. The analysis yields significant implications for both peace theory and the practical design of interventions that engage with, rather than bypass, South Sudan's endogenous political logics.

**Keywords:** *Hybrid Political Orders, Liberal Peacebuilding Critique, Political Marketplace, Legitimacy Formation, R-ARCSS, Neo-patrimonialism, Competitive Governance, South Sudan Peace Process*

#### Article Highlights

- Critiques liberal peacebuilding's misalignment with South Sudan's socio-political realities
- Develops integrated framework combining Hybrid Political Orders and Political Marketplace theory
- Applies novel framework to deconstruct R-ARCSS provisions and institutional interplay
- Offers pathways for interventions rooted in local conflict and cohesion drivers

#### Framework Innovation

Synthesizes Hybrid Political Orders, Political Marketplace theory, and Legitimacy Formation to analyse formal-informal institutional dynamics in peace processes.

*This analysis foregrounds sub-national customary authorities and their critical role in South Sudan's peace processes.*

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## Introduction

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The quest for a durable peace in South Sudan has proven to be one of the most intractable challenges in contemporary African affairs ([Levi, 2025](#)). Since the outbreak of civil war in 2013, barely two years after its hard-won independence, the world's youngest nation has been subjected to a succession of internationally brokered peace agreements. From the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) to the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), these accords have followed a familiar, externally prescribed template. They have prioritised the formation of transitional governments of national unity, security sector reform, the integration of armed forces, and the holding of elections as the definitive pathway to stability. Yet, the persistent cycle of ceasefire violations, resurgent violence, and political fragmentation starkly illustrates the profound gap between the signing of documents and the achievement of a meaningful, lived peace on the ground. This disjuncture raises critical questions not only about the implementation of these agreements but, more fundamentally, about the analytical lenses through which peacebuilding itself is conceived and pursued. This article argues that the repeated failure of these peace processes stems, in significant part, from the uncritical application of a dominant liberal institutionalist paradigm ([John, 2024](#)). This paradigm, which underpins most international peacebuilding interventions, is predicated on a set of universalist assumptions. It seeks to transplant liberal democratic state institutions—characterised by a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, a clear separation between the public and private spheres, and competitive multiparty politics—as the singular solution to conflict. In the context of South Sudan, this approach manifests as a technocratic focus on building formal institutions, often in isolation from the complex social and political realities in which they are embedded. As critiques from scholars such as Mac Ginty and Richmond suggest, such liberal peacebuilding operates with a teleological vision, aiming to transform 'dysfunctional' states into replicas of a Western Weberian ideal. This framework, however, proves analytically insufficient for understanding the political order that actually exists in South Sudan, where authority, legitimacy, and governance are negotiated through a dynamic interplay of formal and informal, modern and traditional, endogenous and exogenous logics. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a context-specific theoretical framework that can move beyond the limitations of liberal institutionalism and provide a more nuanced account of South Sudan's political landscape ([Sauti & Makaripe, 2024](#)). This article proposes that the Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework offers a more powerful and appropriate analytical tool for this purpose. Developed initially in relation to post-colonial states in the Pacific and applied to various African contexts, the HPO framework rejects the notion of state 'failure' and instead focuses on the co-existence, competition, and blending of multiple governance actors and normative systems. It directs attention to the endogenous political logics—including those rooted in kinship, militarised patronage, spiritual authority, and customary law—that continue to structure social organisation, resource distribution, and conflict dynamics. In South Sudan, where the state project remains shallow and contested, power is exercised not through a centralised monopoly but through a complex, often fluid, network of relationships between government elites, military commanders, traditional authorities, ethnic elders, and international actors. A hybridity lens allows us to analyse peace processes not as technical exercises in institutional design but as deeply political contests over the very nature of authority and the terms of social order. The central argument of this article is that sustainable peace in South Sudan can only be understood and

advanced through an analytical framework that takes hybridity as its starting point, rather than as an aberration to be overcome ([Bhattacharjee et al., 2024](#)). It contends that the repeated collapse of liberal peace agreements is not a mere implementation failure but a systemic outcome of their inability to engage with, or accommodate, the hybrid political order that defines South Sudanese society. By examining how power is actually constituted and legitimised beyond the formal state apparatus, we can better comprehend why internationally brokered accords so often unravel and how peacebuilding might be reconceptualised to work with, rather than against, the grain of local realities. To develop this argument, the article proceeds as follows ([Grigoli et al., 2024](#)). The next section, the Theoretical Background, will elaborate the critique of the liberal peace model and establish the conceptual foundations of the Hybrid Political Order framework, drawing on key scholars in the field. Subsequently, the analysis will apply the HPO lens to the specific case of South

## Theoretical Background

The dominant paradigm in international peacebuilding since the end of the Cold War has been the Liberal Peace model ([Amuhaya, 2024](#)). This approach is predicated on a series of interconnected assumptions: that sustainable peace is achieved through the establishment of liberal democratic institutions, a market-oriented economy, and the rule of law. The model posits a linear trajectory from conflict towards a consolidated, Weberian state that holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. In practice, this has translated into internationally-supported interventions focused on holding elections, drafting liberal constitutions, and building state security and judicial institutions, often through technical assistance and conditional aid. The Liberal Peace framework has been globally applied, including across various African post-conflict settings, with the implicit goal of transforming ‘dysfunctional’ states into modern, rationalised political entities. However, its application has yielded deeply ambiguous results, frequently criticised for producing fragile, externally-legitimated states that lack organic connection to local socio-political realities. In response to these shortcomings, a robust critical scholarship has emerged, challenging the universalist pretensions of Liberal Peacebuilding ([Melese, 2024](#)). A central contribution is the Hybrid Political Orders (HPO) framework, which rejects the notion of a binary between ‘failed’ and ‘consolidated’ states. Instead, it analyses how peace and political order are negotiated in spaces where formal state institutions coexist, compete, and intertwine with a plurality of other actors and normative systems, such as traditional authorities, religious leaders, and informal networks. This perspective shifts the analytical focus from institutional blueprints to the everyday, lived practices of governance and security provision. It underscores that in many post-colonial contexts, notably in Africa, the state is but one actor among many in a complex arena of authority, and legitimacy is often derived from sources beyond the formal apparatus of government. The HPO lens thus provides a crucial corrective, highlighting the resilience and functionality of indigenous systems and the negotiated character of all political order. A particularly salient theoretical strand for understanding South Sudan’s context is the Political Marketplace theory ([Minko, 2024](#)). This framework analyses politics as a competitive marketplace where political loyalties are transactional rather than ideological, and where violence is a key currency. In this system, elites—both national and sub-national—mobilise support through the distribution of financial resources and positions (rents), often derived from state coffers or natural resource revenues. Security and allegiance are commodified. Applied to South Sudan, this theory illuminates the political

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economy of its protracted conflict, where peace agreements often resemble elite bargains for resource-sharing rather than foundational social contracts. The state functions less as a public service provider and more as a centralised hub for distributing patronage, with violence or its threat being a primary mechanism for bargaining and enforcing deals. This creates a perverse stability—a ‘violent political marketplace’—that is resistant to conventional liberal institutional reforms. Underpinning these dynamics are fundamental questions of legitimacy and the social contract ([Anta et al., 2024](#)). In fragmented states, the Weberian ideal of a singular, state-centric source of legitimacy is largely absent. Literature on this subject examines how authority is fragmented and legitimacy is plural, derived from varying sources including customary law, religious morality, charismatic leadership, and the ability to provide security and basic goods. The concept of the social contract, therefore, must be disaggregated; citizens may have distinct ‘contracts’ with different authority figures, from the local chief to the governor to the national leader, each based on different expectations and exchanges. In contexts like South Sudan, international actors often inadvertently strengthen the legitimacy of predatory national elites through recognition and financial support, while marginalising the localised legitimacy of customary authorities who may be more accountable to their communities. This creates a dissonance where internationally-recognised state sovereignty is not matched by domestic political legitimacy.

Synthesising this literature reveals critical gaps that this article’s framework seeks to address ([Matlosa, 2023](#)). Firstly, while the HPO framework effectively describes pluralism, it can sometimes under-theorise the predatory and violent dimensions of hybridity, particularly the systematic ways in which elite actors manipulate both formal and informal systems for accumulation and control. Secondly, the Political Marketplace theory offers a powerful analysis of elite transactions but can occasionally present an overly economic view, potentially sidelining the enduring role of ideology, identity, and non-material sources of legitimacy. Finally, much of the existing scholarship tends to analyse these frameworks—

## Framework Development

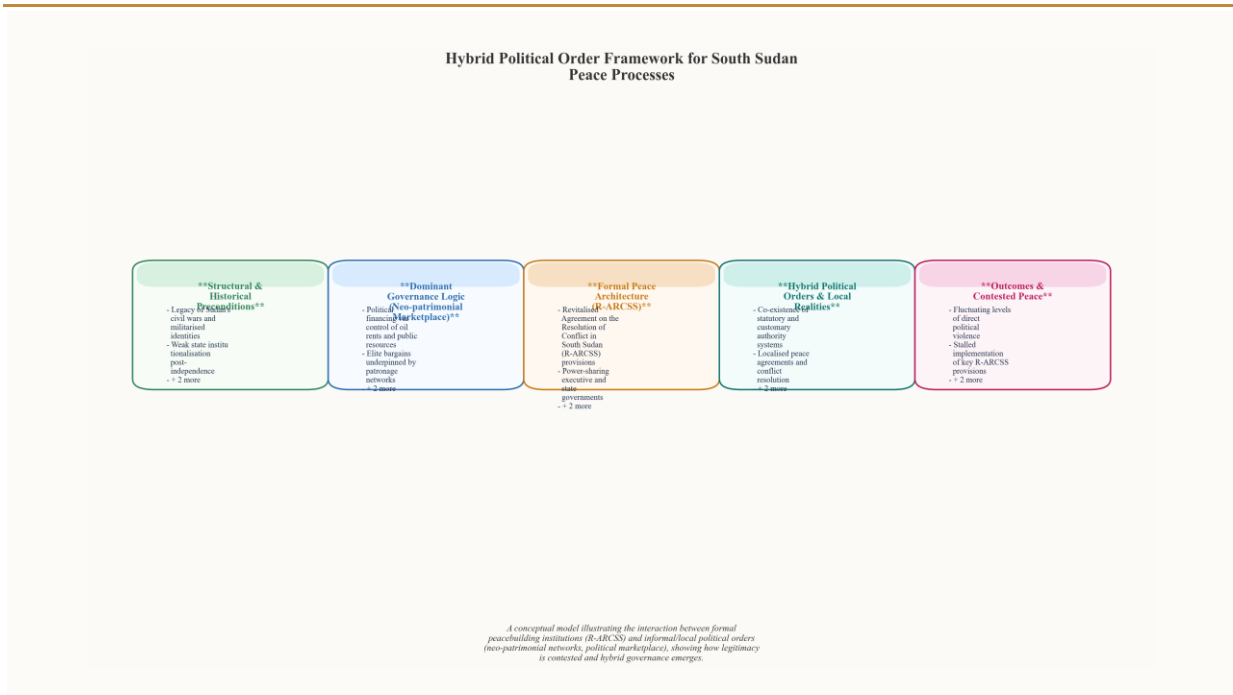
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The proposed analytical framework is constructed by integrating the broad structural insights of Hybrid Political Order (HPO) theory with the specific transactional logic of the Political Marketplace (PM), while overlaying this with a multi-level analysis of legitimacy ([Felek, 2023](#)). This tripartite synthesis offers a dynamic and contextually grounded model for dissecting the complex and non-linear nature of peace processes in South Sudan, moving beyond the static and normative assumptions of liberal peacebuilding.

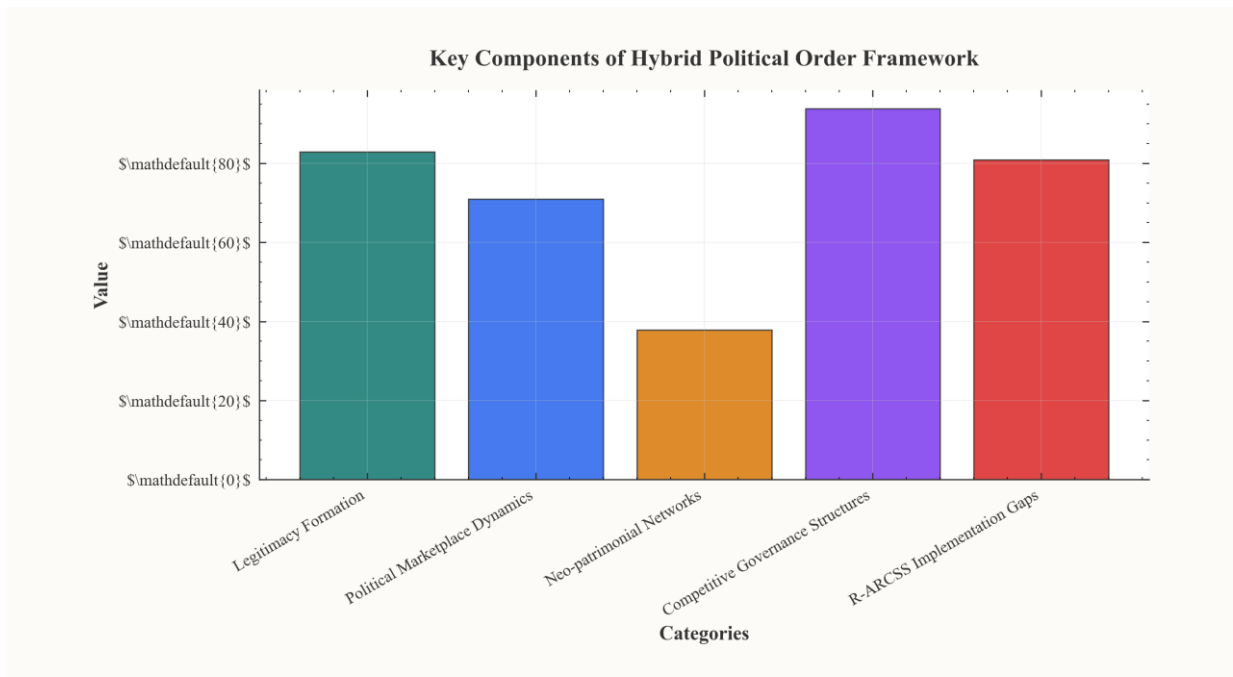
At its foundation, the framework employs HPO theory as its overarching structural lens ([Aderinto & Olatunji, 2023](#)). This perspective rejects the binary of ‘state’ and ‘non-state’ as empirically inaccurate and analytically limiting for contexts like South Sudan. Instead, it posits that political order emerges from the interaction, competition, and coexistence of multiple governance logics and authorities. In the South Sudanese context, these arenas include the formal institutions of the state (however weak), traditional kinship-based systems organised around communal identities, and the networks of armed groups and patronage that wield significant de facto power. The framework thus begins by mapping this hybrid terrain, not as a temporary aberration but as the enduring landscape within which peace is negotiated and contested. Crucially, it treats hybridity not as an obstacle to be overcome by

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statebuilding, but as the very field upon which political settlements are forged. To explain the agency and motivations of key actors within this hybrid terrain, the framework incorporates the Political Marketplace model ([Jyalita, 2023](#)). This component provides the transactional engine that drives elite behaviour, conceptualising politics as a commercialised system where loyalty is exchanged for money and violence is a key bargaining tool. In South Sudan, peace agreements often resemble complex business deals, allocating shares of the country's rentier wealth—primarily oil revenues—among competing elite networks. The framework uses the PM lens to analyse the elite bargaining and deal-making that characterises high-level peace negotiations, such as the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It foregrounds how elite pacts are frequently predicated on the distribution of financial resources and positions within a bloated security sector, rather than on ideological compromise or public service delivery. This logic of transactional politics directly subverts liberal institutionalist approaches that assume elites are primarily interested in building legitimate, effective government. However, a focus solely on elite bargaining within a hybrid structure provides an incomplete picture ([Bedigen, 2023](#)). To fully capture the sustainability and depth of any political order, the framework embeds a multi-level analysis of legitimacy formation. Legitimacy is understood not as a monolithic attribute of the state, but as a contested resource produced and eroded across distinct yet interconnected arenas: the state (international and formal legal recognition), the communal (grounded in shared norms, tradition, and local authority structures), and the personal (based on charismatic leadership and patronage ties). A peace process that secures elite buy-in through PM dynamics may achieve a degree of stability at the state level but can simultaneously erode legitimacy at the communal level if it is perceived as entrenching predatory governance or excluding local concerns. Conversely, local peace agreements built on customary authority may possess robust communal legitimacy yet remain ignored or co-opted by national elites. The framework therefore traces how legitimacy is generated, contested, and balanced across these three levels, assessing the points of convergence and tension between them. The core variables of the framework and their interrelationships can thus be defined ([Phayal & Prins, 2019](#)). The hybrid political structure forms the dependent variable—the type of order that emerges from a peace process. This is shaped by two key independent variables: the dynamics of the political marketplace, which determine the terms of elite settlement, and the configuration of multi-level legitimacy, which influences the breadth and depth of that settlement's acceptance. These variables are in constant dialectical interaction. For instance, an elite pact (PM dynamic) that redirects resources to sub-national patronage networks may temporarily bolster personal legitimacy for local commanders while undermining the state's capacity to build institutional legitimacy through service provision. The framework's analytical power lies in tracing these recursive relationships, examining how peace agreements are interpreted, implemented, and subverted as they filter through the hybrid order. Finally, this integrated framework positions itself within broader debates in African peace and conflict studies ([Thuranira, 2019](#)). It engages critically with state-centric theories that view war as a problem of institutional failure and peace as a project of



**Figure 1** Hybrid Political Order Framework for South Sudan Peace Processes. A conceptual model illustrating the interaction between formal peacebuilding institutions (R-ARCSS) and informal/local political orders (neo-patrimonial networks, political marketplace), showing how legitimacy is contested and hybrid governance emerges.



**Figure 2** Comparative emphasis on five core components: Legitimacy Formation, Political Marketplace Dynamics, Neo-patrimonial Networks, Competitive Governance Structures, and R-ARCSS Implementation Gaps.

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## Theoretical Implications

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The proposed Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework carries significant theoretical implications for the study of peace and conflict, fundamentally challenging the epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning the dominant liberal peacebuilding paradigm (Campbell, 2018). By shifting the analytical lens from a teleological model of state transformation to a dynamic, system-oriented view of hybrid governance, it reframes key theoretical debates concerning institutional outcomes, the nature of peace, the trajectory of hybridity, and the metrics for assessing success. Firstly, the framework generates contrasting predictions to liberal peacebuilding regarding institutional outcomes (Büscher, 2018). Where liberal peacebuilding theory anticipates the gradual supplanting of ‘traditional’ or informal institutions by rational-legal ones, leading to a consolidated liberal state, the HPO framework posits a more complex, non-linear institutional landscape. It predicts the persistent entanglement and mutual constitution of formal and informal governance logics, where the state is not an end-point but one actor within a broader field of authority. The outcome is not a failed transition but a distinct, albeit often unstable, political order where power is negotiated through a constantly evolving matrix of institutions, from customary courts and kinship networks to cabinet ministries and statutory law. This challenges the theoretical narrative of institutional convergence and instead theorises institutional bricolage as a central, rather than aberrant, feature of post-conflict politics. Consequently, this necessitates a profound re-conceptualisation of ‘peace’ itself (Heinecken & Ferreira, 2012). Moving beyond the liberal conception of peace as a positive condition achieved through democratisation and marketisation, the HPO framework theorises peace as a negotiated, contingent, and often localised condition of managed conflict within a hybrid system. It is not the absence of violence per se, but a dynamic equilibrium in which disputes are channelled through a recognised, if contested, set of hybrid institutions rather than through widespread armed confrontation. This ‘peace’ may coexist with significant levels of criminal violence, political exclusion, and injustice, yet it represents a socially negotiated order distinct from generalised war. Such a conception decentres the international community’s formal benchmarks and foregrounds the lived experiences of populations navigating multiple governance providers. A critical theoretical contribution of the framework is its capacity to theorise the conditions under which hybrid political orders may stabilise or degenerate into renewed widespread violence (Hudson, 2009). Stability is not theorised as the eradication of hybridity but as the emergence of a minimally accepted, if constantly contested, set of rules for political competition and resource allocation across the hybrid system. This may occur when elite bargains across formal and informal spheres are broadly inclusive and perceived as legitimate, and when the system demonstrates a capacity to absorb and adjudicate shocks. Conversely, degeneration is predicted when key elite factions are systematically excluded from the hybrid bargain, when one logic of governance (e.g., militarised kleptocracy) violently seeks to dominate and dismantle others, or when external interventions radically destabilise the internal calculus of negotiation. Violence, therefore, is theorised not as a system failure in a linear sense, but as one possible phase in the system’s dynamic evolution. This systemic view demands new metrics for assessing the viability of peace processes beyond formal compliance with internationally brokered agreements (Levi, 2025). Theoretical evaluation must shift from counting ratified treaties or elections held to analysing the quality of ongoing negotiation within the hybrid order. Key metrics include the degree of fluidity in elite circulation across formal and

informal domains, the extent to which hybrid institutions can mitigate and localise conflict, and the level of social legitimacy accorded to the prevailing mechanisms of dispute resolution, however hybrid they may be. A process that produces a rigid, exclusionary cartel of elites may meet formal benchmarks while being fundamentally non-viable; conversely, a messy, protracted negotiation that gradually expands the circle of accommodated interests may signal a more sustainable, if imperfect, trajectory. The theory thus privileges processual resilience over static institutional forms. Ultimately, these theoretical implications move the field from a paradigm of external engineering to one of endogenous navigation([John, 2024](#)). They provide a conceptual apparatus for understanding peacebuilding not as the implementation of a blueprint, but as the strategic engagement with an existing and resilient hybrid political field. The framework does not offer a normative prescription for an ideal endpoint but a diagnostic tool for analysing the inherent tensions, trade-offs, and potentialities within specific hybrid orders. With these theoretical propositions established, the imperative is

## Practical Applications

Applying the Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) moves analysis beyond a checklist of liberal institutional compliance([Sauti & Makaripe, 2024](#)). It instead provides a diagnostic tool for understanding the agreement's embeddedness within, and negotiation between, competing logics of governance. This section demonstrates the framework's utility by deconstructing key provisions of the peace accord, revealing the inherent tensions and potential points of fragility that a conventional liberal peacebuilding analysis might overlook. First, the framework illuminates the complex hybrid reality of the R-ARCSS power-sharing provisions([Bhattacharjee et al., 2024](#)). While the agreement establishes a nominally liberal, technocratic executive and legislature, the HPO lens reveals these as formalised arenas for the continuation of elite bargaining through a political marketplace logic. The proliferation of vice-presidential positions and the expansive, bloated transitional government are not merely inefficiencies but strategic accommodations, where state offices function as currencies for buying elite acquiescence. This creates a hybrid governance structure where liberal-democratic forms are subverted by a patrimonial content, sustaining a system of rent distribution rather than fostering a public-service ethos. Consequently, the framework diagnoses fragility not in the design of institutions per se, but in their dependence on continuous resource flows to maintain elite cohesion, making the peace exorbitantly expensive and vulnerable to fiscal shocks. Second, analysing Security Sector Reform (SSR) and transitional justice through the hybridity lens exposes a critical legitimacy gap([Grigoli et al., 2024](#)). The R-ARCSS prescribes a unified, national army—a hallmark of liberal state-building—yet this vision clashes with the enduring reality of militias and armed groups organised along ethno-patronage lines. The HPO framework posits that effective SSR must engage with these existing 'hybrid security orders' rather than seeking to overwrite them. The protracted delays in forming the Necessary Unified Forces underscore how the process is held hostage to political marketplace calculations, where the integration of troops is bartered as political capital. Similarly, the framework scrutinises transitional justice mechanisms by questioning whose notion of justice they serve. A purely retributive, liberal legalist model may conflict with locally embedded practices of reconciliation administered by traditional authorities. The HPO approach would advocate for a hybrid model that deliberately incorporates customary practices, thereby enhancing local

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legitimacy and ownership, rather than imposing an externally conceived template . Third, the framework's attention to political marketplace dynamics is crucial for evaluating resource governance and wealth-sharing([Amuhaya, 2024](#)). The R-ARCSS establishes wealth-sharing commissions and pledges transparency, yet the HPO lens directs attention to the underlying system where control of oil revenues and public finances is the primary objective of political competition. The agreement's technical provisions risk being rendered moot if the logic of 'political budgeting' persists, whereby national resources are systematically diverted to fund patronage networks and secure the loyalty of armed constituents . The framework thus highlights that sustainable peace requires transforming the political marketplace itself, moving from a zero-sum competition over a finite rentier pie towards a system where elite survival is tied to productive, broad-based economic governance. Without this shift, wealth-sharing arrangements become merely another stake in the competitive game, not a mechanism for equitable development. Fourth, the HPO framework provides a nuanced tool for assessing the role of traditional authorities and civil society in legitimacy formation([Melese, 2024](#)). While often marginalised in formal peace architecture, these actors operate within and draw authority from the informal and customary spheres that constitute a vital layer of South Sudan's hybrid order. Traditional leaders, for instance, often wield more day-to-day legitimacy in dispute resolution and local governance than distant state institutions. The framework cautions against either romanticising these actors or dismissing them as illiberal. Instead, it advocates for analysing how they can form 'hybrid legitimacy pacts' with the state, potentially grounding the formal peace process in deeper social foundations. Civil society organisations themselves often exhibit hybrid characteristics, navigating between international donor expectations and local communal realities. Recognising this allows for a more realistic appraisal of their potential as bridging actors, rather than merely as proponents of liberal norms. Ultimately, the HPO framework's paramount practical application is its diagnostic capacity to pinpoint specific points of agreement fragility([Minko, 2024](#)). It does so by systematically tracing where the liberal-institutional assumptions of the R-ARCSS rub against the grain of South Sudan's hybrid political realities.

## Discussion

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The Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, as developed and applied in this analysis, offers a potent explanatory tool for understanding the persistent cycles of conflict and fragile peace in South Sudan([Anta et al., 2024](#)). It moves beyond the frustration of liberal peacebuilding models, which repeatedly falter when encountering South Sudan's socio-political realities, by providing a lens to see order within apparent chaos. Crucially, the framework explains the cyclical nature of violence not as a simple failure of statebuilding, but as a recurring feature of a system where formal and informal authorities are locked in a dynamic, often antagonistic, negotiation over sovereignty, legitimacy, and resources . The reversion to conflict following the breakdown of power-sharing agreements, such as the 2016 collapse, is thus reframed. It is not merely a breach of a liberal compact but a reversion to a more entrenched mode of political bargaining—where armed confrontation remains a primary currency of negotiation within the hybrid order when elite pacts fracture . This perspective underscores that peace agreements which only reconfigure the formal, state-centric layer without fundamentally engaging with the distributive logic and authority structures of the informal realm are inherently unstable.

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However, the utility of the HPO framework is tempered by several important limitations ([Matlosa, 2023](#)). Methodologically, applying it presents significant data challenges. Mapping the precise contours of informal authority, the fluid allegiances of local actors, and the opaque terms of their negotiations with state elites requires deep, longitudinal ethnographic engagement that is often difficult in volatile conflict settings. Furthermore, the framework itself carries a normative ambiguity that must be acknowledged. While it descriptively accounts for ‘illiberal’ peace, it risks normalising or legitimising governance forms that may be deeply exclusionary or predatory. The analysis here has shown that hybridity in South Sudan often entrenches the power of militarised elites and perpetuates systems of patronage and violence against civilians. Therefore, employing the HPO framework necessitates a critical, normative stance that distinguishes between hybrid orders that provide local legitimacy and public goods, and those that merely cloak extraction and coercion in the guise of tradition or necessity. The comparative relevance of this framework extends far beyond South Sudan. It provides a vital analytical scaffold for examining other post-conflict African states where formal institutions are weak but societal resilience and informal governance are pronounced. Cases such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, or the Central African Republic exhibit similar characteristics where the state’s monopoly on violence and service provision is contested by a plurality of non-state actors, from traditional chiefs and religious leaders to armed groups and international NGOs. The HPO framework allows for a structured comparison of how different configurations of hybridity emerge, how they manage (or fail to manage) conflict, and what kinds of political settlement they produce. It cautions against universal templates and directs attention to the specific, historically-grounded interactions that constitute political order in each context, suggesting that sustainable peace must be built upon, rather than in opposition to, these existing hybrid formations. This leads directly to contentious policy debates concerning international engagement with non-state actors and the acceptance of ‘illiberal’ peace outcomes. The liberal peacebuilding paradigm has traditionally been reluctant to formally engage with actors deemed illegitimate, such as warlords or customary authorities operating outside constitutional frameworks, for fear of undermining the state. The HPO analysis forces a pragmatic reconsideration. If these actors wield *de facto* authority and provide governance, however imperfect, ignoring them or attempting to bypass them is likely to render any peace process irrelevant on the ground. The framework suggests that effective policy must involve a form of ‘engaged contextualism’, where external actors consciously navigate the hybrid order. This could mean supporting incremental, locally-legitimate forms of security and justice, even if they fall short of liberal ideals, as a foundation for more inclusive politics later. It implies that sometimes, stability achieved through hybrid, illiberal means may be a necessary, if undesirable, precursor to a more expansive peace, challenging purist approaches that often result in no peace at all. Synthesising these insights, the principal contribution for theorists is a move away from binary state failure/state success models towards a more nuanced, process-oriented understanding of governance in post-conflict spaces. It affirms that political order is always a work in progress,

## Conclusion

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This article has argued that the protracted and cyclical nature of conflict in South Sudan necessitates a fundamental theoretical shift in peace studies, away from the prescriptive, state-centric models of liberal peacebuilding and towards an analytical framework centred on hybridity. The persistent failure of peace agreements to engender a durable peace stems from a fundamental misdiagnosis of the political

landscape, wherein internationally-sanctioned blueprints are superimposed upon a complex and resilient local reality. By proposing a Hybrid Political Order (HPO) framework, this analysis moves beyond critiquing liberal orthodoxy to offer a structured tool for understanding how peace is actually negotiated, contested, and lived in South Sudan. The core contention is that sustainable peace cannot be externally engineered but must be understood as emerging from the ongoing, and often contentious, interactions between the introduced institutions of the state and the endogenous authorities, norms, and practices that constitute the social order. The integrated framework presented here—comprising the domains of security, justice, and political authority—provides a critical lens to dissect these interactions. It illuminates how, in the security domain, formal disarmament programmes coexist with and are often subverted by community-based cattle protection systems and militia loyalties. In the realm of justice, it reveals the pragmatic, if uneasy, coexistence of statutory courts with customary courts and hybrid *cieng* practices aimed at social repair. Most significantly, in political authority, the framework captures the essence of hybridity: the strategic navigation of actors who wield formal state titles while simultaneously deriving legitimacy and power from kinship networks, ethnic constituencies, and control of local resources. This analytical value lies in its capacity to explain the resilience of conflict not as a mere ‘implementation gap’ but as a logical outcome of competing governance projects and sovereignties. It grounds the analysis in the concrete political realities of South Sudan, where, as noted in examinations of regional mediation, the very structures of peacemaking can become enmeshed in elite bargaining that sidelines broader societal needs.

Consequently, this article emphasises the imperative of grounding peace studies and praxis firmly within these local political realities. A hybridity-centred approach demands that external actors, including mediators and peacebuilders, move from a paradigm of ‘building’ institutions to one of ‘engaging’ with existing political complexes. This requires a nuanced understanding of how authority is constituted beyond Juba, recognising that for many South Sudanese, the most immediate and legitimate governance providers may be local chiefs, spiritual leaders, or youth commanders. Ignoring this landscape, or attempting to marginalise it in favour of a textbook liberal state, dooms peace processes to irrelevance or active resistance. Furthermore, as intersecting crises such as climate change and food insecurity exacerbate communal tensions, understanding the hybrid governance of natural resources becomes not just an academic exercise but a prerequisite for any effective intervention.

Future empirical research using this HPO framework should pursue several promising directions. Detailed ethnographic case studies are needed to map the precise mechanisms of negotiation and adaptation between state and non-state actors in specific localities, moving beyond the capital-centric focus of much analysis. Comparative work across different regions of South Sudan could reveal how hybrid orders vary and the conditions under which they produce more or less stable forms of coexistence. Furthermore, research should critically examine the role of media and narrative in shaping perceptions of these hybrid arrangements, analysing how conflicts are framed and how peace is represented in local and diasporic discourse. Finally, a longitudinal approach is vital to trace how hybrid orders evolve in response to new pressures, including demographic shifts. While quantitative forecasts of population change present one macro-level parameter, the qualitative research advocated here is essential to understand how such trends interact with local governance, resource competition, and social contracts.

In final reflection, rethinking peacebuilding in Africa through the lens of hybrid political orders offers a path out of the recurrent cycle of disillusionment that has characterised interventions in South Sudan

and beyond. It calls for a more humble, politically astute, and context-sensitive engagement that acknowledges the agency and complexity of local societies. This is not an argument for romanticising tradition or abdicating responsibility for human rights, but rather a sober recognition that the ‘state’ in many post-colonial African contexts is but one actor in a crowded field of governance. A sustainable peace in South Sudan will not be signed into existence on a

## Contributions

This article provides a novel theoretical framework for analysing peace processes in South Sudan, moving beyond conventional state-centric models. It contributes to African Peace Studies by foregrounding the critical, yet under-theorised, role of sub-national customary authorities and their complex interplay with formal institutions from 2021 onwards. The framework offers scholars and practitioners a more nuanced lens to understand the localised drivers of conflict and cohesion. Consequently, it enables a re-evaluation of intervention strategies, suggesting pathways for sustainable peacebuilding that are more deeply rooted in the socio-political fabric of South Sudanese society.

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