



Published: 09 August 2023

African Peace Studies (Political Science focus) | Paper | Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2023

## AFRICAN PEACE STUDIES (POLITICAL SCIENCE FOCUS)

Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 2023

### COMMENTARY

## Beyond the R-ARCSS

*A Critical Commentary on the Political Economy of Elite Bargaining in South Sudan's Stalled Peace Process*

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security; Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba; SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: [nyuonabraham@gmail.com](mailto:nyuonabraham@gmail.com)(mailto:nyuonabraham@gmail.com)

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19476256](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19476256)

Received: 15 April 2023 | Accepted: 27 June 2023 | Published: 09 August 2023 | DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19476256](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19476256)

### ABSTRACT

This commentary offers a critical analysis of the political economy underpinning South Sudan's faltering peace process, with a focus on the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). It argues that the agreement's primary function has been to facilitate elite resource bargaining and power consolidation, rather than to foster genuine national reconciliation or address the structural drivers of conflict. The analysis examines the institutionalisation of violence through security sector arrangements, the marginalisation of civil society, and the persistent economic predation that sustains the status quo. The conclusion contends that without a fundamental reorientation towards inclusive governance and economic justice, the R-ARCSS risks becoming another in a series of failed elite pacts.

**Keywords:** *Elite Bargaining, R-ARCSS Implementation, Political Economy of Conflict, Security Sector Arrangements, Resource Governance, Civil Society Marginalisation, Peace Agreement Stalemate*

#### Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining reinforces political marketplace where violence remains viable currency
- Security sector reform and economic governance provisions are incentivized to fail
- Agreement creates perverse equilibrium benefiting signatories without substantive progress
- Analysis foregrounds community-level reconciliation mechanisms overlooked in national reports

#### Core Argument

The stagnation of South Sudan's peace process is a predictable outcome of the R-ARCSS design, which prioritizes elite resource bargaining over addressing structural conflict drivers.

*This commentary synthesizes recent local peace studies literature from 2021-2023.*

---

## Introduction

---

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope proved tragically ephemeral. The nation's descent into a devastating civil war in December 2013 laid bare the profound fragility of its political settlement, exposing deep-seated fractures within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). The conflict, characterised by extreme violence, mass displacement, and a severe humanitarian crisis, prompted a protracted series of regional and international mediation efforts. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, stands as the latest and most comprehensive of these frameworks. It was envisaged as a corrective to the failed 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), aiming to forge a durable peace through a power-sharing government, security arrangements, and a pathway to a permanent constitution and elections. However, nearly a decade since its signing, the peace process remains fundamentally stalled, mired in continuous delays, sporadic violence, and a glaring lack of transformative implementation. This protracted stagnation demands a critical examination that moves beyond technical assessments of compliance to interrogate the very political and economic logic underpinning the agreement. Prevailing academic and policy analyses of South Sudan's peace processes, including the R-ARCSS, have often been framed through the lens of 'elite bargaining' or 'elite pact' scholarship. This perspective, as noted by critics, tends to interpret the conflict and its resolution primarily as a contest for power and resources among a narrow political-military elite, often organised along ethno-regional lines. Within this analytical frame, peace agreements are seen as instruments for redistributing the spoils of the state—ministerial portfolios, control of security sectors, and access to oil revenues—among warring parties. While this approach usefully highlights the personalist and kleptocratic nature of South Sudanese politics, it can inadvertently reduce complex societal conflicts to a mere boardroom negotiation, thereby legitimising the very actors responsible for the violence as the indispensable architects of peace. As De Waal argues, such a focus on elite accommodation often neglects the broader political economy that enables elite predation and the systematic exclusion of the majority of citizens from meaningful political and economic life. Consequently, the R-ARCSS is frequently evaluated on its own terms: the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) is hailed as a success, while delays in unified forces training or constitutional making are lamented as implementation failures, without questioning the agreement's foundational premises. This commentary contends that the stagnation of the R-ARCSS is not merely a product of poor implementation or a lack of political will in a conventional sense, but is rather a predictable outcome of the agreement's design, which is deeply embedded in South Sudan's specific political economy. The central thesis advanced here is that the R-ARCSS functions less as a roadmap to a transformative peace and more as a mechanism for managing elite competition and preserving a rentier state system, thereby perpetuating the status quo of instability. The agreement, by focusing overwhelmingly on incorporating rival elites into a bloated government structure, has reinforced a political marketplace where loyalty is commodified, violence remains a viable bargaining currency, and public resources are systematically diverted to sustain patronage networks. In this context, key provisions on security sector reform, transitional justice, and economic governance—which threaten to disrupt these entrenched systems of accumulation and control—are inherently incentivised to fail. The peace process is thus stalled not in spite of the elite bargain, but because of it; the agreement has created a perverse equilibrium where signatories derive sufficient benefit from the process of peace—maintaining international legitimacy

---

and accessing state revenues—without any compelling impetus to realise its substantive, and potentially destabilising, outcomes.

To develop this argument, the following analysis proceeds in several interconnected parts. First, it will examine the architecture of the R-ARCSS itself, critiquing its overwhelming emphasis on elite power-sharing as the central peacemaking modality. Second, it will analyse how this architecture interacts with South Sudan's rentier political economy, particularly its dependence on oil revenues and the militarised control of resource flows, to create a self-perpetuating cycle of stalled reform. Third, the commentary will explore the consequences of this stasis, arguing that the endless extension of transitional

---

## Analysis and Discussion

---

The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is best understood not as a framework for societal transformation but as a sophisticated instrument for managing elite competition. Its architecture reveals a primary concern with apportioning state power and resources among a narrow circle of belligerents, thereby institutionalising the very political economy that precipitated the civil war. As de Waal argues, such agreements often function as 'political marketplaces' where elites negotiate the distribution of rents and offices, a dynamic starkly evident in the R-ARCSS's intricate power-sharing formulae. The proliferation of vice-presidential positions, ministerial portfolios, and legislative seats serves as the primary currency of this bargain, creating a bloated government of national unity that is less an executive body and more a cartel for stabilising elite relations. Consequently, the peace process becomes self-referential, focused on maintaining the bargain between signatories rather than delivering governance or public goods to the citizenry. This elite-cartel model, as Pinaud notes, is inherently conservative, designed to preserve the status quo of a militarised patronage system rather than to reform it. The agreement thus succeeds in its primary, albeit unstated, objective: to halt large-scale violence between the principal signatories by guaranteeing their access to the fiscal sinews of the state. A critical manifestation of this elite cartel is the agreement's treatment of security, which has perpetuated a system of militarised governance. The provisions for cantonment, disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration, and the formation of a unified national army, have been largely stillborn. These failures are not merely logistical but are politically expedient. The cantonment sites, where they were established, swiftly degenerated into humanitarian catastrophes, a outcome that suited the interests of military commanders on all sides. Maintaining forces in a state of nominal cantonment allows elites to retain their military assets as bargaining chips, ensuring their personal security and political relevance within the unstable patronage network. The envisaged unified force remains a phantom, as the various armed factions continue to owe allegiance to their respective patrons rather than to a national chain of command. This deliberate stasis formalises a security landscape where multiple, parallel armies exist, their loyalties privatised, and their sustenance drawn from state resources or local predation. As such, the security arrangements of the R-ARCSS have effectively sanctioned the continued militarisation of politics, ensuring that coercive power remains the ultimate arbiter of disputes within the elite bargain, thereby hollowing out any prospect for civilian, democratic authority. Underpinning this stasis is an economic model of predation that the peace agreement leaves fundamentally unchallenged. South Sudan's political elites derive power and wealth primarily from control over the country's oil revenues and public finances. The R-ARCSS establishes mechanisms for financial oversight and transparency, such as the Economic and Financial Management Authority, but

these have been systematically neutered or ignored. Oil revenues continue to flow through opaque off-budget systems, fuelling patronage and securing the loyalty of armed clients. This economic architecture actively disincentivises meaningful peace implementation. For the incumbent elite, a transformative peace that institutes accountability and equitable resource management would sever the very lifeline of their power. Conversely, for opposition elites brought into the government, the agreement offers a share of these illicit rents, co-opting them into the system of predation rather than motivating them to reform it. The peace process, therefore, creates a perverse equilibrium where all signatories benefit materially from the formal status of ‘peace’ while having little incentive to alter the governance and economic structures that make the state dysfunctional for its citizens. This ‘resource curse’ is thus meticulously managed by the agreement, not resolved, ensuring that peace remains a lucrative business for the few. The most profound flaw in this elite bargain is its deliberate exclusion of the South Sudanese populace. The R-ARCSS is a pact between armed entities, relegating civil society, women’s groups, faith-based leaders, and representatives of displaced communities to the periphery of ‘consultation’ rather than recognising them as core stakeholders. Sub-national grievances—including inter-communal violence, land disputes, and conflicts over local resources—are treated as secondary issues to be addressed later, if

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this commentary has argued that the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has functioned not as a transformative blueprint for peace but as a mechanism for consolidating a violent and exclusionary political settlement. The agreement’s architecture, centred on elite power-sharing and wealth distribution, has effectively institutionalised the very logics of predation and communal exclusion that precipitated the civil war. As analysed, the R-ARCSS has facilitated a precarious elite bargain that prioritises the stability of the regime coalition over the substantive demands of the South Sudanese populace for security, justice, and equitable development. Consequently, the peace process remains stalled in a procedural limbo, where nominal compliance with timelines masks a fundamental lack of political will to implement provisions that would dismantle the existing kleptocratic system. The entrenched political economy of elite bargaining, as underscored throughout this analysis, reveals a fundamental paradox. The peace agreement, while necessary to halt large-scale combat, has become an obstacle to a more profound and sustainable peace by reinforcing the authority of a narrow political-military business class. The perpetual delays in implementing critical chapters on security sector reform, transitional justice, and the constitution-making process are not merely technical failures but strategic choices by signatories to preserve their economic and political interests. This environment, where peace dividends are captured by elites, continues to fuel localised violence and widespread public disillusionment, further eroding the legitimacy of the state and the agreement itself. Therefore, meaningful progress demands a fundamental shift in approach, from elite accommodation to the construction of an inclusive, citizen-centred governance framework. A sustainable peace in South Sudan cannot be brokered solely between generals in capital hotels; it must be forged through a genuine renegotiation of the social contract between the state and its citizens. This requires moving beyond the R-ARCSS’s current framework to prioritise the security and welfare of ordinary South Sudanese. Key to this is accelerating and genuinely popularising the permanent constitution-making process, ensuring it is

---

a transparent, participatory endeavour that establishes clear mechanisms for public accountability and decentralised power, rather than a tool for entrenching executive dominance. Furthermore, tangible steps towards transitional justice and accountability are not merely moral imperatives but political necessities to break cycles of impunity and build a foundation for collective national identity. For external actors—including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and the Troika—supporting this shift requires moving from advocating for superficial procedural compliance to leveraging their influence to foster structural change. This entails a more coherent and condition-based approach that links continued political, financial, and technical support to unambiguous benchmarks reflecting a genuine commitment to inclusive governance. Donor nations must rigorously align their development assistance with peacebuilding objectives, ensuring aid does not inadvertently subsidise the very systems of elite capture that undermine stability. Critically, external partners should use their diplomatic and financial weight to protect and amplify civic space, ensuring that South Sudan’s robust civil society, women’s groups, and faith-based leaders have a mandated and influential role in all peace and governance processes, particularly the constitutional review. As posited, the international community must reassess its often uncritical support for an agreement that sustains a violent status quo, and instead prioritise strategies that empower non-elite constituencies. The prospects for such a renegotiated social contract, however, remain soberingly narrow. The current elite pact, however fragile, offers its signatories considerable short-term rewards, making voluntary relinquishment of power and resources unlikely. The path forward is fraught, lying somewhere between the collapse of the current bargain into renewed conflict and the arduous, externally-pressured evolution of the settlement towards greater inclusivity. The most plausible, though still challenging, avenue may be a sustained, multi-level pressure campaign that combines consistent international conditionality with strengthened internal civic mobilisation. This could gradually alter the cost-benefit calculations of the ruling coalition, making the risks of excluding the populace greater than the risks of sharing power and wealth more equitably. Ultimately, South Sudan’s protracted crisis is a stark reminder that a peace agreement which fails to address the root political economy of conflict risks becoming part of the problem. The R-ARCSS, in its current form, has entrenched a system of elite privilege at the expense of national cohesion. While the agreement provides a necessary discursive framework for engagement, the future of South Sudan hinges on the capacity of its people and the integrity of

## Contributions

This commentary makes a distinct contribution by analysing the implementation of the Revitalised Peace Agreement through the critical lens of local peace studies literature from 2021-2023. It synthesises recent, on-the-ground scholarly perspectives to challenge top-down analytical frameworks that dominate the discourse. By foregrounding community-level reconciliation mechanisms and subnational tensions often overlooked in national monitoring reports, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the persistent obstacles to sustainable peace. This reframing offers both scholars and practitioners a vital, context-rich assessment of the agreement's lived realities during a pivotal period.