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BOOK REVIEW

Beyond the Signed Accord

A Critical Review of 'The Unfinished Business of Peace: Power, Patronage, and Violence in South Sudan'

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ABSTRACT

This review critically assesses a pivotal new monograph analysing the persistent failure of peace agreements in South Sudan. It evaluates the book's central thesis that a political economy of violence, rooted in a militarised patronage system, fundamentally undermines formal peace architecture. The analysis scrutinises the author's use of ethnographic data and elite interviews to deconstruct the cyclical relationship between resource predation, militia formation, and political fragmentation. The review concludes by situating the work within contemporary African peace studies, considering its implications for rethinking intervention models and the very ontology of 'peace' in neopatrimonial states.

Keywords: *South Sudan peace process, Neopatrimonialism, Political economy of conflict, Elite bargaining, Peace agreement implementation, Militarised patronage, African peacebuilding, Hybrid political orders*

Article Highlights

- Analyses South Sudan as a 'militarised political marketplace' where loyalty is commodified
- Challenges liberal peacebuilding paradigms that treat the state as an institution to build
- Explains why elite bargaining perpetuates violence despite formal peace architecture
- Questions whether the model underestimates non-elite agency and endogenous change

Core Thesis

South Sudan's peace agreements function as elite pacts for redistributing resources within a transactional patronage system, not as instruments for political transformation.

This review engages critically with de Waal's political marketplace model for understanding conflict intractability.

Introduction

Since its independence in 2011, the trajectory of the Republic of South Sudan has been defined by a profound and tragic paradox: the persistent failure of peace in a nation born from a protracted struggle for self-determination. The celebratory hopes that accompanied its secession from Sudan have been systematically eroded by recurrent, devastating civil conflicts, most notably the brutal war that erupted in 2013, scarcely two years after independence. This chronic instability is underscored by a disheartening cycle 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)—which, while halting large-scale combat, have consistently failed to produce a sustainable and transformative peace. Instead, these accords often appear as fragile truces between elite factions, punctuating but not resolving a deeper crisis of governance. The central puzzle for scholars and practitioners alike, therefore, is not merely why these agreements collapse, but why a political system so evidently reliant on them remains incapable of moving beyond a state of perpetual, violence-tinged negotiation. It is within this critical juncture that Alex de Waal's The Unfinished Business of Peace: Power, Patronage, and Violence in South Sudan makes its timely and incisive intervention.

De Waal, a pre-eminent scholar of conflict and governance in the Horn of Africa, brings decades of analytical rigour to bear on South Sudan's predicament. Moving beyond the conventional narratives of ethnic hatreds or mere state fragility, the book posits a powerful central thesis: South Sudan operates as a 'militarised political marketplace'. In this framework, political loyalty is commodified, and power is exercised through a system of transactional patronage, financed primarily by the state's oil revenues and accessed through the threat or use of violence. The political elite, comprising military-political entrepreneurs, engage in continuous bargaining where the currency is money, security portfolios, and the allegiance of armed followers. Peace agreements, within this logic, are not instruments for foundational political transformation but are rather the most formalised instances of these market transactions—elite pacts for redistributing resources and positions within the existing system. Consequently, de Waal argues that the 'unfinished business' of peace is not simply the implementation of signed documents, but the fundamental reconfiguration of this marketplace itself. The book contends that without dismantling the economic and militarised logics of patronage, South Sudan's peace processes will remain 'unfinished', perpetually vulnerable to breakdown when the market's terms shift or its finances dwindle.

This review critically engages with de Waal's seminal work, arguing that his political marketplace model provides an indispensable lens for understanding the intractability of conflict and the cyclical nature of peacemaking in South Sudan. The analysis will proceed in three substantive parts. First, it will provide a detailed summary of the book's core argument, tracing its theoretical underpinnings in the concept of the political marketplace and its meticulous application to the South Sudanese case, from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) era through to the post-independence civil wars. The summary will highlight de Waal's examination of how oil revenue, militarisation, and international engagement have shaped and sustained this competitive system of patronage.

The second section will assess the significant contributions of the work to the field of African Studies and peace and conflict studies. It will explore how the book challenges orthodox liberal peacebuilding paradigms, which often treat the state as an institution to be built rather than as a prize to be captured in a violent auction. The review will argue that de Waal's framework compellingly explains the resilience

of conflict systems and the hollowing out of formal institutions, offering a more realistic, if pessimistic, diagnosis of the South Sudanese condition than approaches focused solely on constitutional design or technical capacity-building.

Finally, the review will offer a critical evaluation of the model's limitations and the consequent challenges it presents. While lauding its explanatory power, this section will probe questions surrounding the agency of non-elite actors, the potential for endogenous change, and the sometimes totalising nature of the marketplace analogy. It will consider whether the model, in its focus on high politics and transactional logic, risks underestimating the role of ideology, social movements, or alternative forms

Summary

The monograph under review, 'The Unfinished Business of Peace: Power, Patronage, and Violence in South Sudan', presents a trenchant critique of conventional peacebuilding frameworks applied to the world's youngest nation. It advances a sophisticated political economy analysis, arguing that the recurrent cycles of conflict in South Sudan are not aberrations or mere implementation failures of peace agreements, but rather the logical outcomes of a deeply entrenched system of governance. The book's central and most compelling contribution is its conceptualisation of the 'violent patronage nexus', which it posits as the primary engine of both conflict and political order in the post-independence period. This framework moves beyond simplistic ethnic narratives to expose how elite competition for control over state resources—and the concomitant power to distribute them through vast patronage networks—drives organised violence and systematically undermines sustainable peace .

Methodologically, the work is distinguished by its skilful combination of macro-level political economy critique with granular, localised case studies. This approach allows the authors to trace the threads of the violent patronage nexus from high-level political manoeuvres in Juba down to their devastating manifestations in the states of Unity, Jonglei, and the Equatorias. By grounding its analysis in specific sub-national contexts, the book vividly illustrates how national elite bargains and rivalries are enacted through local actors, militias, and community structures, often exacerbating existing inter-communal tensions and creating complex, multi-layered conflicts. This methodological rigour provides empirical heft to its theoretical claims, demonstrating that the system of patronage is not an abstract concept but a lived reality that shapes everyday security, economic survival, and political allegiance across the country .

The historical analysis is structured around key phases of elite bargaining and state formation, beginning with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) period. The book contends that the CPA, while culminating in independence, inadvertently entrenched a winner-takes-all political model. It established a framework where power and resource allocation were concentrated in the presidency, setting the stage for the patronage politics that would define the nascent state. The analysis then meticulously charts the unravelling of the post-independence settlement, arguing that the outbreak of civil war in 2013 was a direct result of tensions within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) over access to the patronage system, rather than a purely ethnic schism. The subsequent peace agreements, particularly the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), are examined not as breaks from this system but as mechanisms for its renegotiation and reproduction. Each accord is shown to function primarily as a tool for elite accommodation, redistributing offices and economic privileges among competing factions while doing little to transform

the underlying governance structures that fuel violence .
A critical thread running through the historical narrative is the analysis of the political marketplace in South Sudan, where loyalty is commodified and violence is a key instrument for asserting claims to resource flows. The book details how the state's treasury, oil revenues, and humanitarian aid have been systematically harnessed to fund security services and militias loyal to specific elites, thereby militarising the patronage system. This political economy of conflict creates perverse incentives, where maintaining a certain level of instability can be more profitable for elites than establishing a genuine peace, as crisis justifies the centralised control of resources and attracts international funding that can be diverted. The localised case studies powerfully demonstrate how this national-level system filters down, with local elites and community leaders being co-opted into, or resisting, these central networks, often sparking or intensifying local conflicts in the process .
The volume's conclusions offer a sobering assessment of the inherent limitations of liberal peacebuilding as practised in South Sudan. It argues that the international community's overwhelming focus on signing high-level political agreements between elite actors has been fundamentally misguided. By treating these elites as legitimate partners for peace and funneling resources through the state structures they control, external actors have often inadvertently reinforced the very violent patronage nexus that perpetuates the conflict. The book criticises the technocratic emphasis on constitution-making, security sector reform, and elections—hallmarks of the liberal peace toolkit—when these processes are detached from a transformative agenda aimed at dismantling the system of patrimonial

Critical Analysis

The book's most significant contribution lies in its granular, ethnographic examination of sub-national power structures, which constitutes its primary evidentiary strength. By moving beyond Juba-centric analyses, the authors provide a compelling, ground-level view of how peace agreements are metabolised—or more often, instrumentalised—within South Sudan's complex local political ecologies. The detailed case studies of specific states and counties, such as the intricate discussions of patronage networks in Unity State or the shifting allegiances in the Equatoria region, offer a textured understanding that macro-political reports frequently lack . This ethnographic depth convincingly demonstrates that the 'unfinished business' of peace is not merely a national-level political failure but a deliberately sustained system of governance. The evidence drawn from local interviews and historical political trajectories powerfully supports the central thesis that violence is a rational, profitable component of a hybrid political order, rather than a symptom of state collapse.
However, this otherwise robust evidential approach is undermined by a sporadic and inconsistently integrated treatment of gender dynamics and civilian agency. While the analysis of militarised patronage is thorough, the specific gendered economies of war and peace—how sexual violence functions as a tool of political control, or how women's peacebuilding initiatives navigate the 'political marketplace'—receive only peripheral attention . This constitutes a notable omission, given the critical role of women's groups in South Sudanese civic life and the particular ways in which patriarchal structures intersect with the authors' own models of patronage. Similarly, the portrayal of civilian populations often veers towards depicting them as victims or passive recipients of elite machinations, with insufficient exploration of everyday forms of resistance, social navigation, or the agency of communities in forging localised pacts that exist parallel to formal agreements. A deeper engagement with the literature on civilian agency and gendered political economy would have fortified the analysis, making it less an

account of what elites do to people and more a complex portrait of a society enduring and adapting to a predatory system.

Conceptually, the work's reliance on the 'political marketplace' model is both its defining framework and a potential point of contention. The authors employ this model rigorously to explain the monetisation of loyalty and the transactional logic of South Sudanese politics at the elite level. It proves exceptionally effective in deconstructing the failure of peace accords, which are framed as mere moments of elite price-fixing rather than genuine political settlements . Yet, this very focus on transactions risks overshadowing other foundational elements of political authority. The analysis could be strengthened by a more sustained interrogation of how localised legitimacy—derived from customary authority, moral ethnicity, or wartime service—interacts with, and sometimes resists, purely monetary logics. While the book acknowledges these competing legitimacies in its ethnographic sections, the overarching 'marketplace' metaphor occasionally flattens them into mere variables within a transactional calculus. A more dialectical engagement between the market model and theories of moral authority would have provided a richer conceptual toolkit for understanding why some patronage networks prove more resilient than others, beyond mere spending capacity.

In terms of prose and organisational clarity, the book is accessible yet maintains scholarly rigour, though its structure presents certain challenges. The writing is generally clear and avoids unnecessary jargon, making its complex arguments digestible for an interdisciplinary audience. However, the organisation, which oscillates between thematic chapters and deep-dive case studies, can at times feel repetitive, with core arguments about the political marketplace reiterated across multiple contexts without significant progressive development. Some of the ethnographic chapters, while invaluable in their detail, could be more tightly woven into the central theoretical narrative, creating a more seamless flow between empirical evidence and conceptual argument. Nonetheless, the prose succeeds in conveying the urgency and complexity of the subject matter without sacrificing analytical precision, ensuring the book will be a valuable resource for both specialists and advanced students of peace and conflict studies.

Ultimately, the critical analysis reveals a work of substantial empirical heft and conceptual ambition, albeit with areas where its scope could be expanded. Its unparalleled sub-national evidence base sets a new standard for detailed research on South Sudan's internal dynamics, forcing a recalibration of how peace processes are evaluated. The relative under-examination of gender and non-elite agency, however, leaves certain dimensions of the 'unfinished business' underexplored. Furthermore, while the political marketplace model

Contextual Evaluation

The book's central thesis is most productively situated within the vigorous, long-standing scholarly critique of the liberal peacebuilding model. By foregrounding the entrenched systems of 'power, patronage, and violence', the author directly engages with and extends the literature on hybrid political orders and competitive statebuilding. This work moves beyond simply diagnosing the failure of liberal templates to take root, instead providing a granular anatomy of the alternative governance system that has actively subverted them. The analysis chimes with critiques that view South Sudan not as a state in abeyance but as a functioning, if violently exclusive, political marketplace where loyalty is commodified and sovereignty is negotiated through patronage rather than imposed through a monopoly on legitimate force . In this sense, the book makes a significant contribution by detailing the specific

'rules of the game' within South Sudan's political economy, illustrating how international peacemaking efforts, by focusing narrowly on elite power-sharing in Juba, often become mere another resource to be captured and instrumentalised within these pre-existing logics.
Regarding the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the book provides an indispensable framework for understanding the agreement's subsequent stagnation. The author persuasively argues that the R-ARCSS, much like its 2015 predecessor, was structurally misaligned with the realities of South Sudanese politics. By mandating a unity government and integrating rival militias into a national army, the agreement effectively codified a temporary equilibrium in elite competition while doing little to dismantle the underlying patronage networks or alter the incentives for violence. The book's detailed historical analysis explains why key provisions on security sector reform, transitional justice, and constitutional review have foundered: they threaten the very foundations of the incumbent system. The contribution here is to shift the analytical focus from technical implementation delays to a more profound political blockage, demonstrating that the 'unfinished business' is not a matter of oversight but of design. The peace process, as critiqued here, became a vehicle for regulating elite conflict at the apex, while conspicuously failing to generate a peace dividend or any semblance of accountable governance for the broader population .
This analysis carries substantial policy relevance for regional and international actors, notably the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and major donor nations. The book serves as a stark caution against conflating the signing of an accord with the achievement of peace. For IGAD mediators, traditionally focused on brokering elite compromises, the critique implies a need to reassess the end goal of mediation. Is it merely to stop active warfare between principal signatories, or to foster a more transformative political settlement that addresses the grievances of marginalised communities and regions? The book suggests that without sustained, informed pressure on governance and accountability—areas often sidelined as 'internal affairs'—signed agreements may simply incubate the next cycle of conflict. For international donors funding the peace process and humanitarian response, the work highlights the perils of inadvertently reinforcing patronage systems through large-scale, off-budget financial flows that can be easily co-opted. It calls for a more politically savvy aid architecture that recognises and seeks to mitigate its potential entanglements with localised systems of power and resource distribution .
Consequently, the book forces a critical re-evaluation of what constitutes 'success' in African peace processes. It challenges the prevailing international metrics of success, which often prioritise short-term ceasefire maintenance, the formation of transitional governments, and the holding of elections. Through the South Sudanese case, the author demonstrates that these milestones can be achieved without altering the fundamental drivers of violence and instability; indeed, they can sometimes strengthen them by bestowing international legitimacy on unreconstructed elite pacts. This argument aligns with a growing body of scholarship advocating for a more nuanced, context-specific, and patient understanding of peacebuilding outcomes. Success, from this perspective, might be better measured by indicators of declining communal violence, the opening of political space beyond the elite circle, the establishment of credible civic institutions, and tangible improvements in human security, rather than the mere completion of a pre-ordained, technocratic roadmap . The book implies that a successful process in a context like South Sudan would be one that incrementally rew

Conclusion

In synthesising the arguments presented throughout this review, it becomes clear that 'The Unfinished Business of Peace' constitutes a vital, if circumscribed, contribution to the literature on South Sudan and conflict studies more broadly. Its principal and enduring strength lies in its unflinching diagnosis of the structural and systemic impediments to meaningful peace, moving the analytical focus decisively beyond the technical shortcomings of individual agreements. By foregrounding the political marketplace and the logic of competitive patronage, the authors provide a powerful explanatory framework for the cyclical resumption of violence. This lens convincingly illustrates how peace accords themselves are absorbed into the political economy of conflict, becoming not instruments for transformation but rather new currencies in the endless competition for state resources and elite allegiance. The work's insistence on the 'unfinished' nature of peace—conceptualised not as a destination but as a perpetually contested and subverted process—is its most significant theoretical offering, challenging the linear assumptions that have long plagued international mediation efforts. The book's rigorous examination of the state as a prize, rather than a set of institutions serving a public good, is particularly illuminating. As detailed in the analysis of elite bargains, the formal architecture of governance—including the very presidency and transitional legislatures—is revealed to function primarily as a mechanism for distributing rents and consolidating personal power networks. This systemic perspective is the text's core scholarly virtue, offering a necessary corrective to approaches that view conflict drivers as merely ethnic animosities or as correctable through institutional design alone. For students of African politics, the volume serves as a masterclass in applying the political marketplace model to a specific, protracted crisis, demonstrating its utility in explaining the resilience of violent kleptocracy even in the face of sustained international pressure and professed elite commitment to peace.

However, as this review has argued, this very strength is the source of the book's most notable limitation. The overwhelming focus on elite agency within the high-stakes game in Juba renders non-elite actors—the vast majority of South Sudanese—as largely passive victims or as demographic pools to be mobilised by patrons. The critique regarding the 'view from the centre' remains salient; the complex localised logics of conflict, the spaces of community-level resilience and peacebuilding, and the agency of women's groups, youth, and religious leaders are insufficiently explored. While the structural analysis explains why top-down deals fail, it provides less insight into the sources of societal endurance and the potential, however fragmented, for bottom-up political change. This omission risks presenting South Sudan's political economy as a hermetically sealed system, inadvertently downplaying the historical and ongoing forms of civic action that exist within and against these oppressive structures. Furthermore, while the authors are rightly critical of the international community's role, the prescriptive pathway beyond this impasse remains underdeveloped. The conclusion that external actors must move beyond 'facilitating elite deals' is well-supported, but the alternative—beyond broad calls for leveraging financial pressure—lacks specificity. A deeper engagement with the dilemmas of applying such leverage without exacerbating humanitarian suffering, or of how to meaningfully support civil society in such a repressive environment, would have strengthened the policy relevance of the work. The analysis is superb at deconstructing the flawed international playbook but less robust in outlining a coherent new strategy for engaged external actors who wish to avoid the pitfalls of both complicity and abandonment. Notwithstanding these limitations, the scholarly value of 'The Unfinished Business of Peace' is undeniable. It is a necessary and urgent text for any serious student of African politics, conflict

resolution, and post-colonial state formation. Its necessity lies in its forceful demystification of peacemaking, stripping away the diplomatic façade to reveal the raw transactions beneath. The book compels its readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that in contexts like South Sudan, formal peace processes can often be a continuation of war by other means, a reconfiguration of the competitive landscape rather than its dissolution. For conflict studies, it reinforces the imperative to ground analysis in the specific political economy of rent-seeking and elite survival, rather than in generic templates of power-sharing and constitutional reform.

In final judgement, this volume succeeds brilliantly in its primary aim: to explain the deep-rooted, systemic reasons why peace remains so elusive in South Sudan. It may not provide a complete picture of the nation's political landscape, particularly from its peripheries, nor a detailed roadmap for transformation.

Contributions

This volume makes a significant contribution to the field by providing a critical, contemporary analysis of peacebuilding in the world's youngest nation. It moves beyond theoretical frameworks to ground its examination in the complex realities of South Sudan between 2021 and 2024, offering insights into the stalled implementation of the revitalised peace agreement. The interdisciplinary approach, synthesising political, anthropological, and legal perspectives, furnishes scholars and practitioners with a nuanced understanding of local agency, hybrid governance, and the persistent challenges to sustainable peace. Its timely assessment serves as an essential reference for ongoing research and policy formulation in a critical period for the country.