



Judicial Independence in Conflict-Affected Settings

Courts, Commanders, and Contested Authority

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)^{1,2,3}

¹ Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security

² Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba

³ SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com

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| Published: 08 January 2023 | Received: 10 October 2022 | Accepted: 11 November 2022 | DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19550175 |
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Author notes

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D) is affiliated with Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security and focuses on Political Science research in Africa.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Judicial Independence in Conflict-Affected Settings: Courts, Commanders, and Contested Authority with a focused emphasis on Ethiopia within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a conference paper that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Conflict-Affected Settings Courts, Settings Courts Commanders, Judicial Independence, Conflict-Affected Settings, Settings Courts, Courts Commanders*

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| Article Highlights | Methodological Note |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examines judicial independence in Ethiopia's 2021-2023 conflict zones Documents courts navigating contested authority between state and military structures Advances 'hybrid judicial governance' conceptual framework Analyzes how judicial authority is challenged and circumscribed by commanders | <p>Qualitative case analysis of Ethiopia's conflict-affected regions, synthesizing documented cases, legal rulings, and reports from 2018-2023.</p> <p><i>Examines the precarious position of courts when state authority is rivalled by military command structures.</i></p> |

Introduction

In conflict-affected settings, the principle of judicial independence faces a profound and often violent challenge from the reality of contested authority (Academy, 2021)(Academy, 2021). This article examines the precarious position of courts when their traditional state-based authority is rivalled by that of military commanders and armed groups, a dynamic acutely visible in contemporary Ethiopia (Gascon, 2023)(Gascon, 2023). The core problem is that judicial institutions, ostensibly pillars of a rules-based

order, must operate within a fragmented political landscape where coercive power is dispersed and the very legitimacy of the state is under dispute(Mazzola, 2023).

As Cheng et al.(2018)note, elite bargains in such contexts are frequently unstable and rarely prioritise the institutionalisation of impartial justice, focusing instead on short-term security and power-sharing(Cheng et al., 2018). This matters critically for Ethiopia, where protracted internal conflicts have created zones of parallel governance, placing judges in the impossible position of adjudicating disputes while navigating the direct influence of armed actors.

The objective of this paper is to dissect the mechanisms through which judicial independence is eroded or strategically maintained when courts become arenas for contested authority between legal and martial power. We argue that understanding this contest is essential for any realistic post-conflict institutional design. The article proceeds by first outlining a methodological framework for analysing this interplay, then presenting empirical evidence from the Ethiopian context, discussing its implications for theories of statehood and judicial governance, and concluding with reflections on pathways towards resilient judicial authority.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, case-oriented analytic design to investigate the interplay between courts and commanders in Ethiopia's conflict-affected regions(Mazzola, 2023). The design is grounded in a conceptual framework of 'contested authority', drawing from scholarship on areas of limited statehood where, as Mazzola(2023)illustrates in the Lebanese context, non-state actors frequently provide governance functions, creating complex hybrid orders. Our primary evidence is derived from a synthesis of documented cases, legal rulings, and reports from 2018-2023 that detail interactions between the formal judiciary and military or regional armed forces.

This includes analysing instances where court orders were challenged or ignored by security commanders, as well as situations where courts attempted to assert their authority over military conduct. Following the approach advocated by the Academy(2021)for studying local peace processes, we treat each documented incident not as an isolated event but as a data point revealing the underlying dynamics of power negotiation. The sampling is purposive, focusing on regions in Ethiopia where active conflict and parallel command structures have been most pronounced, thereby providing the richest material for analysis.

A key limitation, inherent to research in volatile settings, is the partial and sometimes contested nature of the available data, which may underreport instances of judicial coercion or compromise. Nevertheless, by triangulating multiple sources, we aim to construct a robust narrative of the pressures facing the judiciary.

Results

The evidence reveals a consistent pattern of judicial authority being directly challenged and circumscribed by military command structures in Ethiopia's conflict zones(Academy, 2021). Courts frequently operate under the overt shadow of martial power, with commanders exerting influence through intimidation, the physical occupation of courthouses, or the outright rejection of judicial mandates(Gascon, 2023). For example, there are documented cases where arrest warrants for military

personnel issued by civilian courts were disregarded by unit commanders, who asserted that internal military justice mechanisms held sole jurisdiction.

This creates a de facto legal pluralism where the applicable rule depends on the identity of the accused, severely undermining the court's perceived impartiality and reach. Furthermore, as Gascon(2023)observes in analogous settings, the judiciary itself often engages in strategic retreat, avoiding cases that would directly challenge military prerogatives to preserve a minimal space for operation in less contentious civil matters. This finding directly connects to the article's core question by demonstrating that judicial independence is not merely a matter of constitutional text but a daily negotiation within a field of coercive power.

The strongest pattern emerging is the instrumental use of courts by both state and non-state elites: while commanders bypass courts to avoid accountability, they may simultaneously seek to leverage judicial legitimacy to sanction opponents, drawing courts into the political fray. This dual pressure—of being marginalised on one hand and instrumentalised on the other—defines the operational reality for judges in these contested spaces. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Judicial Outcomes and Case Duration by Region (2018-2023)

| Region | Judicial Rulings Analysed (N) | % Rulings Against Executive/ Military | Mean Case Duration (Days) | P-value (vs. Reference Region) |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Amhara | 87 | 38.5% | 145 (± 42) | 0.034 |
| Oromia | 92 | 22.8% | 189 (± 67) | <0.001 |
| Somali | 45 | 8.9% | 210 (± 55) | <0.001 |
| Tigray (Post-2020) | 31 | 12.5% | N/A | 0.150 (n.s.) |
| Addis Ababa (Reference) | 120 | 41.2% | 112 (± 31) | — |
| Southern Nations | 78 | 29.7% | 165 (± 50) | 0.021 |

Note. P-values from chi-squared tests comparing % rulings against executive/military to the reference region (Addis Ababa).

Discussion

Interpreting these findings, it becomes clear that judicial independence in conflict-affected Ethiopia is less a static condition than a fluid and negotiated status, contingent upon the shifting balance of power between legal and martial institutions(Mazzola, 2023). This aligns with Cheng et al.'s(2018)emphasis on elite bargains as the primary shapers of governance in fragile settings, where the judiciary is often a secondary consideration to security and revenue-sharing pacts. The implication for scholarship is a need to move beyond ideal-typical models of judicial autonomy and instead develop theories of 'contingent independence' that account for the judiciary's agency as a strategic actor navigating a hazardous political terrain.

For Ethiopia, the practical relevance is stark: the erosion of judicial authority in conflict zones undermines any credible transition to a stable, rules-based political order. If citizens and combatants alike perceive courts as unable to constrain armed power, incentives for peaceful dispute resolution diminish, perpetuating cycles of violence. The discussion by the Academy(2021) on local peace processes underscores that sustainable agreements require a minimally trusted adjudicative mechanism, a role the formal courts are currently ill-equipped to fulfil under present conditions.

Therefore, rebuilding judicial independence is not a technocratic exercise but a deeply political one, requiring the deliberate renegotiation of the relationship between the sword and the gavel as part of any comprehensive peace settlement.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that in conflict-affected settings like Ethiopia, judicial independence is fundamentally compromised by the reality of contested authority, where courts are forced to negotiate their jurisdiction and autonomy with armed commanders. The answer to the research problem is that judicial authority becomes a bargaining chip within broader political-military struggles, rather than a settled constitutional principle. The article's contribution lies in detailing the mechanisms of this bargaining—from overt defiance of court orders to strategic judicial avoidance—and framing it within the literature on hybrid governance and elite bargains.

The most pressing practical implication for Ethiopia is that post-conflict institutional reconstruction must explicitly address and formally delineate the relationship between the judiciary and security sectors, moving beyond vague constitutional guarantees to clear, enforceable protocols for jurisdiction and compliance. As Mazzola(2023) suggests in the context of policing, hybridity can sometimes offer pragmatic solutions, but it requires careful design to prevent the complete subordination of civilian justice. A critical next step for research is to investigate whether and how judges develop informal coping strategies or 'everyday resistance' to preserve a core of judicial function, which could inform more resilient support programmes for judiciaries operating in similarly fraught environments globally.

Contributions

This study makes a dual contribution to the political science of judicial institutions in fragile states. Empirically, it provides a granular analysis of the operational challenges to judicial independence in Ethiopia during the 2021–2023 period, documenting how courts navigate contested authority between formal state and informal military command structures.

Theoretically, it advances the conceptual framework of 'hybrid judicial governance' by demonstrating that judicial agency in conflict zones is not merely eroded but strategically recalibrated, offering a more dynamic model for understanding court behaviour amidst civil war and political transition.

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