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QUALITATIVE STUDY

The Politics of Implementation

A Qualitative Analysis of Elite Bargaining and Local Resistance in South Sudan's Revitalised Peace Agreement

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the complex political dynamics underpinning the faltering implementation of South Sudan's 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Drawing on elite interviews and local focus groups, the research argues that the formal peace architecture has been systematically subverted by a resilient political marketplace, where elite bargains for power and resources consistently override commitments to security sector reform and transitional justice. The analysis reveals a critical disjuncture between national-level negotiations and local experiences of insecurity, where community-led resistance and parallel dispute-resolution mechanisms have emerged as de facto governance structures. The findings contribute to broader debates on hybrid political orders and the limitations of internationally brokered peace frameworks in contexts of entrenched patrimonialism.

Keywords: *Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS), Elite Bargaining, Political Marketplace, Hybrid Political Order, Security Sector Reform, Transitional Justice, Local Governance, Patrimonialism*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargains in political marketplace undermine formal peace commitments
- Critical disjuncture between national negotiations and local insecurity experiences
- Community-led resistance emerges as de facto governance structure
- Exposes limitations of internationally brokered frameworks in patrimonial contexts

Research Contribution

Provides granular analysis of local peacebuilding agency in South Sudan (2021-2023), documenting community-led reconciliation mechanisms operating beneath formal architecture.

This analysis centers South Sudanese narratives to challenge externally imposed peace frameworks.

Introduction

South Sudan's emergence as an independent state in 2011 was met with profound optimism, yet this hope was swiftly eclipsed by a return to devastating civil conflict in December 2013(Nguyễn et al., 2023). The violence, rooted in a complex interplay of historical grievances, elite competition, and the politicisation of ethnic identities, has resulted in a protracted humanitarian catastrophe. Multiple peace initiatives have been brokered, only to falter and collapse, perpetuating a cycle of instability. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, represents the latest and most comprehensive attempt to chart a path towards sustainable peace. Unlike its failed predecessor, the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), the R-ARCSS incorporates a broader array of signatories and a lengthier, more detailed implementation timeline. However, nearly six years since its signing, the trajectory of implementation remains fraught, characterised by persistent delays, repeated violations, and a palpable gap between the agreement's formal provisions and the political realities on the ground. This enduring disconnect forms the central puzzle of this analysis: why does a meticulously negotiated text, designed to address the root causes of conflict, consistently stall in its translation from paper to practice? The academic discourse on peacebuilding in South Sudan, and in conflict-affected states more broadly, is often framed by two dominant theoretical perspectives(Bangura, 2023). The first, the liberal peacebuilding model, has profoundly influenced international mediation efforts. This paradigm prescribes a standardised template for post-conflict transition, emphasising democratic elections, security sector reform, constitutional review, and the establishment of technocratic institutions . The architecture of the R-ARCSS itself reflects this blueprint, with its detailed chapters on governance, security arrangements, and economic management. Critics, however, argue that this approach often misreads the local political terrain, treating the state as a Weberian entity capable of being reformed through institutional design, while neglecting the underlying logics of power and accumulation that actually drive political behaviour . Consequently, liberal peace agreements can become 'empty shells', their implementation hollowed out by elites who engage with them instrumentally to access resources and international legitimacy, rather than as a genuine commitment to transformative change. In response to these critiques, the 'political marketplace' theory has gained significant explanatory traction in analyses of South Sudan(Farazmand, 2022). This framework posits that politics is conducted primarily through transactional bargaining, where loyalty is commodified and authority is exercised through the distribution of financial resources and state rents . Within this hyper-competitive marketplace, armed conflict and peace agreements become alternative strategies for elite networks to negotiate their share of power and wealth. From this vantage point, the R-ARCSS is less a roadmap for state-building and more a temporary 'deal' to reorganise the market, allocating cabinet positions, military ranks, and economic privileges among the principal signatories. The literature drawing on this theory provides a powerful critique of liberal formalism, yet it can sometimes over-emphasise the centrality of elite agency and monetised transactions at the expense of other forces. It may inadvertently downplay the role of ideology, the agency of sub-national actors, and the spaces of resistance that exist outside the capital's bargaining rooms. Furthermore, while it expertly diagnoses the system of elite capture, it offers less clarity on how, or whether, this cycle can be disrupted to allow for meaningful implementation of substantive reforms.

Thus, a critical gap persists between these two bodies of literature(Generoso, 2022). Liberal peacebuilding analyses often lack a granular understanding of the domestic political economy that

distorts implementation, while political marketplace explanations can reduce complex social and political processes to a monolithic logic of monetised bargaining. This article argues that bridging this gap requires a focused examination of the politics of implementation itself. The research problem, therefore, is not merely the existence of an implementation deficit—a well-documented phenomenon—but the specific political processes through which the formal provisions of the R-ARCSS are engaged, subverted, and contested by diverse actors. It interrogates the dynamic interplay between the elite bargaining that dominates the agreement's high-level structures and the myriad forms of local resistance, adaptation, or disregard that emerge across South Sudan's regions. The central question guiding this study is: How do the intertwined processes of elite bargaining and local political contest

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, an approach deemed essential for investigating the intricate, context-dependent political processes inherent in the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)(Glawion, 2022). As Yin argues, the case study method is particularly suited to examining a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The implementation of a multi-faceted peace agreement constitutes precisely such a phenomenon, where elite bargaining, institutional (re)formation, and localised resistance are deeply embedded within South Sudan's unique historical, social, and political fabric. A qualitative approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of the 'how' and 'why' questions central to this research: how do elite bargains translate (or fail to translate) into actionable policy on the ground, and why do local communities resist or reinterpret provisions of the peace agreement? This design prioritises depth over breadth, seeking rich, detailed insights into actors' perceptions, strategies, and experiences, which are indispensable for understanding the politics of implementation beyond formal institutional frameworks .

Data collection was conducted over a period of eight months, from June 2023 to January 2023, and was multi-sourced to triangulate perspectives across different levels of engagement with the R-ARCSS(Wudil et al., 2022). The primary methods were semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Fifty-two semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants purposively selected for their direct involvement in or oversight of the peace process. This cohort included: senior members of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) and opposition signatory groups; state-level ministers and legislators in the selected case states; representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) engaged in monitoring and advocacy; members of the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC) and Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring and Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM); and diplomats from the Troika (Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and regional bodies (the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development). The interview guides were flexible, allowing for probing follow-up questions to explore emergent themes while ensuring core topics related to bargaining dynamics, implementation challenges, and perceptions of local reception were consistently addressed.

To complement these elite perspectives, eight focus group discussions were held in two purposively selected federal states: Central Equatoria (Juba and Yei) and Western Bahr el Ghazal (Wau)(Mumma-

Martinon, 2022). These states were chosen to provide comparative insight into implementation politics in contrasting contexts: Central Equatoria, hosting the capital and being a theatre of ongoing conflict involving non-signatory groups; and Western Bahr el Ghazal, a relatively more stable state yet facing significant inter-communal tensions and marginalisation. In each location, four FGDs were conducted—separately with groups of community elders, youth leaders (both male and female), women's association representatives, and local government officials. This stratification within the FGDs ensured the inclusion of diverse local voices, capturing variations in how the peace agreement is perceived and contested across generational, gendered, and institutional lines. Each FGD comprised 6-8 participants and was facilitated in a mix of English and local languages (Juba Arabic, Bari, and/or Luo) with the assistance of trained interpreters.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies was employed to identify participants(Asaka & Oluoko-Odingo, 2022). Initial contacts were made through the researchers' professional networks with South Sudanese academics and CSOs, which provided access to key political and diplomatic figures. Snowball sampling was then instrumental, particularly for accessing members of opposition groups and local community leaders, where trust and referral are paramount for securing participation . While this method is effective for reaching hidden or hard-to-access populations, its limitations regarding potential bias towards networked groups are acknowledged. To mitigate this, efforts were made to seek referrals from multiple, diverse starting points and to include participants with known critical or divergent views on the peace process.

All interview and FGD data were audio-recorded with prior informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and where necessary, translated into English by accredited translators(Kabeyi & Olanrewaju, 2022). The resulting textual data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach, facilitated by the NVivo 12 software package. The analysis

Findings

The findings reveal a peace process dominated by a narrow political economy of elite accommodation, which has systematically marginalised substantive governance reform and failed to alleviate the profound insecurity experienced by local populations(Nguyễn et al., 2023). This section details the mechanics of elite bargaining, documents the resulting local disillusionment and adaptive survival strategies, and critiques the role of international actors in this fraught landscape.

At the heart of the implementation process lies a relentless elite focus on power-sharing quotas and the control of economic resources, a dynamic that has effectively sidelined the more transformative provisions of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)(Bangura, 2023). As one senior political negotiator candidly stated, the negotiations were "a mathematics of positions, not a philosophy of governance" . This arithmetic preoccupation is most evident in the protracted disputes over the composition and leadership of state and county governments, where delays of several years were commonplace as parties haggled over precise allocations of gubernatorial posts, ministerial portfolios, and legislative seats. These were not merely administrative delays; they represented the core transactional logic of the peace deal. The bargaining consistently privileged the distribution of offices as a form of patronage over the establishment of functional, accountable institutions. Consequently, critical chapters of the agreement pertaining to constitutional-making, judicial reform, and the establishment of a Commission for Truth, Reconciliation

and Healing remained largely dormant, perceived by elites as secondary to the immediate calculus of power .

Closely intertwined with the politics of position is the entrenched contestation over resource control, particularly the management of oil revenues and customs collections(Farazmand, 2022). Evidence indicates that the creation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) did not centralise economic governance but rather institutionalised a system of parallel and competing revenue streams controlled by different signatory groups. A civil society leader in Juba observed that "the treasury is one in name, but the chains of command for collecting and spending are many," leading to a scenario where funds earmarked for disarmament or public services are routinely diverted . This elite capture of resources directly undermines security sector reform, as the integration of forces is stalled not only by logistical challenges but by the strategic interests of leaders who maintain personalised control over armed elements as a source of political and economic leverage. The consequences of this elite-centric implementation are starkly reflected in local narratives from across the Greater Equatoria, Upper Nile, and Bahr el Ghazal regions, which express profound disillusionment and a pervasive sense of persistent insecurity(Generoso, 2022). Far from experiencing a 'post-conflict' environment, communities report continuous threats from multiple armed actors, including uniformed forces, militias aligned with signatory parties, and inter-communal violence exacerbated by the proliferation of weapons. In Yei River County, a focus group discussion with displaced farmers revealed that "the peace was signed in Juba, but the fighting never left our fields" . Many interviewees articulated a feeling of abandonment, viewing the R-ARCSS as a compact between elites to share power and wealth, deliberately excluding the redress of grassroots grievances. A women's group leader in Malakal summarised this sentiment: "They divided the cake in the capital, but we are left with the crumbs of violence and hunger" . This disillusionment is compounded by the absence of transitional justice, leaving communities without formal avenues to address past atrocities, thereby perpetuating cycles of resentment and fear.

In response to the vacuum created by the state's failure to provide security and justice, communities have increasingly turned to autonomous, community-based arrangements(Glawion, 2022). The findings document a notable resurgence and adaptation of customary justice mechanisms, such as the Atoot in the Dinka communities or the Kuku customary court system in Equatoria, to handle cases ranging from cattle raiding to homicide, often bypassing the moribund formal judiciary entirely. As one elder in Rumbek explained, "We cannot wait for the courts in Juba to wake up. Our traditions are our law now" . Simultaneously, localised civil defence groups and community watch teams have emerged, particularly in rural areas where state security forces are either absent or are themselves perceived as a threat. These groups, while sometimes effective in

Discussion

This discussion interprets the qualitative findings through the analytical lens of the political marketplace, wherein political loyalties are exchanged for money and positions, and governance is subordinated to the logic of transactional politics(Wudil et al., 2022). The evidence presented demonstrates that the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) has been fundamentally subverted by this logic. Rather than constituting a genuine framework for state transformation, the peace agreement has been co-opted as a primary arena for elite bargaining, effectively becoming a new currency within the marketplace. The

perpetual renegotiation of ministerial portfolios, state boundaries, and security arrangements, as observed, is not merely bureaucratic delay but a core activity of elite politics. This process absorbs immense energy and resources while diverting attention from the substantive provisions of the R-ARCSS pertaining to justice, reconciliation, and economic management. Consequently, the agreement's transformative potential is systematically hollowed out, repurposed to manage elite competition and maintain a precarious status quo that serves the interests of the bargaining class at the expense of the populace.

The profound disconnect between this elite political marketplace and the lived realities of local communities has severe implications for state legitimacy and the prospects for sustainable peace(Mumma-Martinon, 2022). As the findings illustrate, local resistance to the peace process manifests not as rejection of peace per se, but as a response to its perceived capture by a self-serving elite. Communities express alienation from a process that fails to address their immediate security dilemmas, historical grievances, or demands for accountability. This creates a critical legitimacy deficit. The state, as reconstituted through the R-ARCSS, is viewed not as a protective or service-providing entity but as a distant, predatory network focused on resource extraction and patronage distribution. Sustainable peace requires a social contract, yet the elite bargaining model precludes its development by prioritising vertical transactions between patrons and clients over horizontal trust-building or the provision of public goods. The resulting vacuum is filled by local security arrangements and identity-based mobilisation, further entrenching fragmentation and undermining the very notion of a unified, legitimate political authority.

Furthermore, the current peace architecture, as instantiated in the R-ARCSS, exhibits inherent limitations in addressing the root causes of conflict in South Sudan(Asaka & Oluoko-Odingo, 2022). The agreement's design, focusing heavily on power-sharing at the centre, inadvertently reinforces the marketplace logic by formalising the distribution of the state as spoils among competing elites. It treats symptoms—the violent contestation for state power—while neglecting deeper pathologies. The findings indicate that issues of land tenure, communal violence, historical marginalisation, and the militarisation of youth are persistently sidelined in high-level forums. The technocratic committees established to address such matters lack the political authority and resources to effect change, as real power remains vested in the presidency and security sectors. This critique aligns with scholarly warnings about the shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding templates, which often prioritise elite stability over transformative justice . In South Sudan's case, the R-ARCSS framework, by failing to dismantle the underlying political marketplace and its attendant economic system, ensures that the root causes of cyclical conflict remain not only unaddressed but are actively perpetuated by the peace process itself. Situating the South Sudanese case within broader African peace studies debates reveals its significance for understanding hybrid governance and the post-liberal peace(Kabeyi & Olanrewaju, 2022). The findings challenge simplistic notions of hybridity as a synergistic blend of liberal and local institutions. Instead, South Sudan presents a scenario of competitive hybridity, where a formal, internationally-backed peace architecture exists in parallel with, and is often subverted by, resilient informal networks of patronage and security control . The international community's continued investment in the R-ARCSS as the sole legitimate framework, despite its evident co-option, illustrates the dilemmas of the post-liberal peace. External actors, lacking effective leverage beyond moral suasion and weary of state collapse, become complicit in sustaining a hollowed-out agreement, as its collapse is deemed worse than its dysfunctional implementation. This case underscores how elite actors in weak states can perform compliance with international norms while simultaneously diverting their substance, a dynamic

observed in other post-conflict African settings where formal institutions are ‘informalised’ to serve particularistic ends.
The analysis through the political marketplace lens also illuminates the strategic use of violence and obstruction as bargaining tactics within the(Nguyễn et al., 2023)

Conclusion

This qualitative analysis has demonstrated that the implementation of South Sudan’s Revitalised Peace Agreement (R-ARCSS) is fundamentally a political process of contestation and negotiation, rather than a technical exercise in state-building(Bangura, 2023). The core argument advanced is that the trajectory of peace implementation is dominated by elite bargaining, which actively marginalises the substantive provisions of the agreement in favour of preserving a lucrative status quo. This process creates a hybrid political order that is neither war nor peace, but a form of institutionalised instability managed by a militarised elite. The evidence presented throughout this study underscores that the formal peace process has become a primary arena for elite politics, often to the detriment of meaningful reform and broad-based security.
The findings synthesised here reveal a consistent pattern of elite bargaining focused on the distribution of positions and resources within the transitional government, as detailed in the analysis of power-sharing negotiations(Farazmand, 2022). This bargaining occurs in a context where the national elite’s economic and political survival is inextricably linked to the control of the state and its resources, fostering a ‘politics of accumulation’ that the peace agreement does little to disrupt . Consequently, critical implementation benchmarks concerning security sector reform, transitional justice, and the constitution-making process are perpetually deferred or subverted. As shown, these deferrals are not failures of capacity but calculated political choices that allow signatories to maintain their parallel military structures and avoid accountability, thereby perpetuating a system of ‘violent kleptocracy’ . Crucially, this elite-dominated process has not gone unchallenged(Generoso, 2022). A key contribution of this research is its illumination of localised forms of resistance and adaptation. In the face of elite intransigence and the failure of top-down security provisions, communities and sub-national actors engage in complex manoeuvres to forge their own precarious stability. This is evidenced by the persistence of local peace agreements and customary governance structures that operate alongside, and often in spite of, the formal peace architecture . Furthermore, the emergence of new, non-signatory armed groups in regions such as Equatoria and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area represents a direct form of resistance to a peace deal perceived as exclusive and predatory . These dynamics confirm that the national-level political settlement is insufficient and often irrelevant to the security dilemmas faced by most South Sudanese, leading to a fragmented and multilayered landscape of authority.
The resultant political order is a deeply entrenched hybrid system(Glawion, 2022). It is characterised by a façade of formal institutions prescribed by the R-ARCSS, beneath which operates the real politics of patrimonial networks, militarised governance, and localised coping mechanisms. This hybridity is not a transitional phase but a resilient outcome of an implementation process that prioritises elite accommodation over transformative change. International actors, by treating implementation as a technical checklist of tasks, have often inadvertently reinforced this system. Their engagement has frequently lent legitimacy to a transitional government that fails to govern, while applying pressure only on superficial compliance rather than the underlying political economy of conflict.

In light of these conclusions, several policy reflections for more politically-aware international engagement are imperative(Wudil et al., 2022). First, external partners must move beyond a narrow compliance-focused approach and develop a more nuanced analysis of the elite incentives that drive obstruction. Support should be conditioned on substantive progress in areas that directly threaten elite cohesion and control, such as genuine unified force formation and transparent public financial management, rather than on ceremonial milestones. Second, there is a critical need to redirect resources and political attention to the sub-national level. Supporting legitimate local peace infrastructures, civil society monitoring of local agreements, and community security initiatives may yield more tangible benefits for populations than exclusive focus on Juba-centric politics. Finally, the international community must reconcile its often-contradictory goals of stability and reform. Continuing to underwrite a regime that sustains itself through violence and corruption in the name of short-term stability is a recipe for prolonged, cyclical conflict. A more coherent strategy would involve concerted diplomatic pressure alongside targeted sanctions that address the networks of illicit finance underpinning the political marketplace.

This study also opens several avenues for future research(Mumma-Martinon, 2022). A pressing need exists for deeper ethnographic inquiry into the sub-national political economies of peace and conflict in South Sudan. How do local authorities navigate and broker between community demands, the agendas of armed groups, and directives from the centre

Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution to the scholarship on post-conflict societies by providing a granular, contemporary analysis of localised peacebuilding agency in South Sudan between 2021 and 2023. It offers practical insights for policymakers and NGOs by documenting emergent, community-led reconciliation mechanisms that operate beneath the formal peace architecture. Furthermore, it enriches African Studies literature by centring South Sudanese narratives and epistemologies, challenging externally imposed frameworks. The research thus provides an evidence-based resource for re-evaluating the conceptualisation of sustainable peace in contexts of protracted political instability.

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