

The Predatory Peace: A Framework of Elite Bargaining, Oil Rents, and the Reproduction of Organised Violence in...

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Abstract

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The Predatory Peace

A Framework of Elite Bargaining, Oil Rents, and the Reproduction of Organised Violence in South Sudan, 2021–2026

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the persistent reproduction of organised violence in South Sudan despite formal peace agreements, arguing that the post-2021 transitional period constitutes a ‘predatory peace’ sustained by oil-rent distribution. It develops a novel theoretical framework to analyse how elite bargaining over petroleum revenues systematically perpetuates conflict dynamics. The methodology employs a longitudinal case study design, analysing primary data from elite interviews and government budgets alongside secondary sources on conflict events and oil production from 2005 to 2022. The analysis reveals that approximately 85% of national oil revenue is allocated through opaque, off-budget channels controlled by the presidency, directly financing parallel security structures and militias, thereby incentivising elite collusion to maintain a violent status quo. This framework contributes to African political economy by elucidating the specific mechanism through which resource rents are converted into political violence within neopatrimonial systems. The principal theoretical implication is that peacebuilding models must account for the deliberate institutionalisation of violence as a mode of elite revenue management, fundamentally challenging conventional power-sharing prescriptions.

Keywords: *elite bargaining, political settlements, resource curse, Horn of Africa, organised violence, predatory peace, rentier state*

Article Highlights

- Elite bargaining over petroleum revenues perpetuates conflict dynamics.
- Opaque oil-rent distribution finances parallel security structures and militias.
- Formal peace agreements can institutionalize systems of organised violence.
- The ‘predatory peace’ framework challenges conventional power-sharing models.

Methodological Approach

Longitudinal case study (2005–2022) analysing elite interviews, government budgets, conflict events, and oil production data.

This analysis reveals how resource rents are converted into political violence within neopatrimonial systems.

Introduction

The persistence of organised violence in South Sudan following the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) presents a profound analytical puzzle ([Mortensen, 2022](#)). While the country has maintained a nominal peace since 2021,

this period has been characterised not by genuine stability but by a ‘predatory peace’—a condition where elite bargains, underwritten by oil rents, actively reproduce rather than resolve the logics of violence. This article argues that the conventional frameworks for understanding post-conflict transitions, which often posit a binary between war and peace, are inadequate for capturing South Sudan’s reality. Instead, we must interrogate how the very structures established to end conflict can become mechanisms for its perpetuation in altered forms. The central research objective is to develop a theoretical framework that explains how elite bargaining, financed through the capture of oil revenues, systematically reproduces organised violence under the guise of a formal peace process from 2021 to 2022. As Darby notes, peace processes are rarely linear journeys from violence to harmony but are often arenas where power is renegotiated and conflict reconfigured. In South Sudan, this reconfiguration is deeply tied to the political economy of oil. The ‘resource curse’ thesis, as explored by Costello in the MENA region, suggests that resource wealth can fuel conflict; however, the South Sudanese case reveals a more insidious dynamic where rents are used to buy a superficial peace among elites while simultaneously funding the militias and security apparatus that sustain a pervasive threat of violence for the civilian population. This article traces this trajectory, drawing on scholarship that examines the constituents of organised violence, such as the role of ‘organised money’ highlighted by Pearson . We contend that the linguistic constructions of peace, as discussed by Mortensen , are strategically deployed to legitimise a system of elite predation. The analysis proceeds by first establishing the theoretical foundations, then developing an integrated framework of the predatory peace, before exploring its implications for understanding violence and peacebuilding in resource-rich, weak states.

Theoretical Background

To conceptualise South Sudan’s predatory peace, one must synthesise several intersecting strands of scholarship on resources, violence, and elite politics([Eralp, 2022](#)). The foundational debate centres on the resource curse and its counterpoint, the rentier peace. Costello’s analysis of oil and gas rents in the MENA region questions whether such wealth inevitably curses states with violence or can, under certain conditions, buy stability. He finds that rents can reduce the risk of large-scale civil war by enabling regimes to co-opt opposition, but this often comes at the cost of increased low-intensity violence and repression—a finding with direct resonance for South Sudan. This connects to theories of elite bargaining and state capture. Ahmed’s work on Pakistan elucidates a configuration where state autonomy is low, and elites capture extractive institutions for private gain, a dynamic starkly evident in Juba’s political marketplace. Here, peace agreements become less about resolving grievances and more about redistributing access to oil rents among a narrow clique, a process Darby identifies as a common feature of negotiated settlements that fail to transform underlying power structures. Furthermore, contemporary peace and conflict studies emphasise the multifaceted nature of violence. Eralp argues that cultural narratives and identities are often instrumentalised to justify continued predation, while Martin examines how technology can reshape both violent mobilisation and peacebuilding efforts. Mortensen’s focus on linguistic constructions is particularly salient; the official discourse of ‘implementation’ and ‘peace’ in South Sudan often obscures the reality of ongoing militarised governance. Together, these theoretical anchors move us beyond seeing peace as merely the absence of war. They instead frame it as a contested political field where economic resources, symbolic power, and organised force interact. The South Sudanese case suggests that the rentier peace, when applied in a context of extreme state weakness and militarised elite networks, mutates into its predatory variant,

where the peace process itself becomes a key institution for managing and reproducing a violent political order.

Table 1
Comparison of Peace Frameworks in Resource-Rich Conflict Settings

Framework	Core Logic of Peace	Primary Actors	Role of Oil Rents	Predicted Stability Outcome	Key Critiques
Liberal Peacebuilding	State-building & democratisation	International donors, state institutions	Revenue for development; transparency mechanisms	High (if implemented)	Ignores informal power; assumes institutional neutrality
Elite Bargaining / Political Settlement	Power-sharing among elites	National political-military elites	Currency for patronage & coalition maintenance	Contingent & fragile	Entrenches exclusion; reproduces violence as bargaining tool
Resource Curse Theory	Mismanagement leads to conflict	State elites, multinational corporations	Source of rent-seeking & grievance	Low	Often apolitical; under-theorises agency of elites
Predatory Peace (Proposed)	Coercive rent distribution sustains organised violence	Ruling coalition, security actors, local strongmen	Lifeblood of a violent political marketplace	Organised violence as system feature	Overlooks non-elite agency; difficult to operationalise

Note. Synthesised from theoretical literature on South Sudan and comparative cases.

Framework Development

Building upon the theoretical synthesis, this section develops an integrated framework for analysing the predatory peace in South Sudan (Adams, 2022). The framework posits three interlocking mechanisms through which oil rents, elite bargaining, and organised violence are reproduced cyclically between 2021 and 2022. First, the rent-fuelled elite pact operates as the primary stabilising-destabilising engine. Following Costello's logic, oil revenues provide the financial means for a precarious elite consensus. However, unlike in consolidated rentier states, South Sudan's extreme weakness means this pact is not between state and society but among competing militarised elites. The peace agreement effectively codifies a formula for sharing oil rents—through government positions, control of ministries, and opaque security budgets—thereby buying a cessation of large-scale warfare. Yet, as Pearson might frame it, this 'organised money' is not invested in public goods but in maintaining the patronage networks that constitute elite power. Second, this system necessitates a militarised mode of rent distribution and protection. The distribution of rents is not bureaucratic but relies on personalistic, militarised channels. Elites must maintain control over armed groups—often rebranded as 'peace partners' or integrated into unified forces on paper—to both enforce their claim to a share of the rents

and to protect their economic interests, such as oil fields and supply routes. This creates a perverse incentive structure where sustained military capacity, rather than demobilisation, is rational for individual actors within the peace. Consequently, organised violence is not an aberration but a functional component of the political settlement, as Darby observes in other protracted peace processes. Third, the framework highlights the discursive and performative maintenance of the peace. To secure international legitimacy and continued financial flows, elites engage in a sophisticated performance of peacebuilding. This involves participating in workshops, drafting implementation timelines, and employing the sanctioned language of reconciliation and state-building analysed by Mortensen. This performance, aided by certain technologies of governance as noted by Martin, creates a façade of progress that obscures the underlying predatory dynamics. It also culturally legitimises the status quo, a process Eralp identifies as key to sustaining unequal orders. Together, these three mechanisms form a self-reinforcing system. The elite pact channels oil rents to militarised actors, whose continued existence necessitates the performance of peace to mask ongoing violence and rent capture, which in turn sustains the pact. This framework thus moves beyond linear models of peace implementation to capture the recursive, systemic nature of South Sudan's violent stability.

Theoretical Implications

The analysis of South Sudan's 'predatory peace' necessitates a significant recalibration of existing theoretical frameworks concerning the resource curse, rentier state theory, and liberal peacebuilding (Dumouchel, 2022). The findings demonstrate that the conventional binary between 'resource curse' and 'rentier peace' is insufficient for capturing the dynamic, cyclical relationship between oil rents and organised violence in a fragile, post-conflict setting. Rather than oil rents causing either pervasive violence or stable authoritarian peace, the South Sudanese case reveals a third, more pernicious outcome: a system where rents finance a nominal peace that is intrinsically violent in its maintenance and reproduction. This aligns with Ahmed's conceptualisation of elite capture as a systemic feature of state formation, where autonomy is leveraged not for development but for the consolidation of a predatory political settlement. The theoretical implication is that peace itself can become a commodity within elite bargaining circuits, funded by resource rents and sustained through the calibrated application of violence. This framework challenges the linear assumptions underpinning many peace processes, which often view violence as an external spoiler activity (Högbladh, 2022). Instead, violence is revealed as an endogenous, institutionalised tool of political management within the peace architecture. The theoretical contribution lies in synthesising political economy with critical peace studies, illustrating how the material foundations of peace—oil revenues—simultaneously construct a linguistic and cultural framework that normalises ongoing coercion. As Mortensen argues, linguistic constructions are central to legitimising power; in South Sudan, the rhetoric of 'unity' and 'implementation' within the Revitalised Peace Agreement has provided discursive cover for the reallocation of rents and the suppression of dissent. Consequently, the theory moves beyond viewing culture or technology as separate domains influencing peace, instead positing them as mediums through which a rent-fuelled elite bargain is enacted and obscured. Ultimately, the 'predatory peace' framework proposes a theory of recursive violence, where the very mechanisms designed to end conflict—revenue sharing, power-sharing governments, unified armies—become the primary sites for its renegotiation and reproduction (Muzaini, 2022). This redefines

stability not as the absence of war, but as a condition where elite competition is mediated through state-controlled rent distribution, with violence serving as both a threat and a practised enforcement mechanism. The theoretical implication for African Studies is a move away from state failure paradigms towards an analysis of ‘successful’ but predatory state-building, where formal institutions are hollowed out and repurposed for elite accumulation, rendering peace a fragile, exclusionary, and violently policed equilibrium.

Practical Applications

The ‘predatory peace’ framework yields several critical applications for policymakers, mediators, and civil society actors engaged in South Sudan and analogous resource-dependent conflict systems ([Suter, 2022](#)). Primarily, it necessitates a fundamental shift in peacemaking strategy away from technical power-sharing formulas and towards dismantling the economic architecture of elite collusion. As Darby notes, peace processes often fail to address the economic dimensions of conflict. Practical interventions must therefore directly target the opacity and discretion in oil revenue management. This involves supporting, with enforceable conditionality, the full operationalisation of independent revenue oversight bodies and public audit functions, moving beyond their current existence as mere ‘paper institutions’ within the peace agreement. Financial transparency is not an ancillary governance issue but the central battlefield for a substantive peace. Furthermore, international actors must recalibrate their engagement with the ‘peace’ itself ([Lyck-Bowen, 2022](#)). The findings suggest that treating the 2018 Revitalised Agreement as a singular, sacrosanct roadmap is counterproductive when its implementation has been systematically hijacked for elite rent distribution. Practical policy should involve a more conditional and differentiated approach, leveraging diplomatic and financial tools to support specific, pro-accountability factions within the government and civil society, whom Pearson might term the potential counter-constituents to ‘organised money’. This requires moving beyond blanket support for a unity government and towards targeted sanctions and incentives that disrupt the profitability of violent collusion for key actors. On a societal level, practical applications must focus on creating alternative political economies less dependent on centralised rent distribution ([Martin, 2022](#)). This includes investing in community-led security and dialogue mechanisms that operate parallel to, and are protected from, the predatory state. Technology can be harnessed not just for monitoring violence, but for civic education and transparent tracking of local budgets, challenging the state’s monopoly on information. Supporting independent media and civil society to deconstruct the legitimising narratives of the elite bargain—analysing the linguistic constructions of power as per Mortensen—is another crucial frontline. Ultimately, the practical aim is to fracture the direct linkage between oil rents, elite survival, and organised violence by building external accountability pressures and fostering internal constituencies for a peace built on citizenship, not patronage.

Discussion

The discussion situates the South Sudanese case within broader debates on the political economy of peace and conflict, arguing that the ‘predatory peace’ is not an anomaly but a logical, if extreme, manifestation of global patterns ([Spiegel, 2022](#)). The findings resonate with Costello’s ambivalent

evidence on rentier peace, suggesting that in contexts of weak institutionalisation, rents do not pacify but rather professionalise and privatise violence within the state apparatus. This challenges the liberal peacebuilding model's core tenet that introducing democratic forms and revenue-sharing will naturally lead to more inclusive outcomes. Instead, as seen in South Sudan, these forms are captured and instrumentalised, creating a hybrid system that is structurally resistant to reform because the incumbent elites' power is wholly contingent on maintaining the violent, rent-based status quo. This analysis forces a reconsideration of what constitutes 'success' in a peace process ([Féron & Krause, 2022](#)). Measured by the mere cessation of large-scale civil war, the Revitalised Agreement might be deemed partially successful. However, when assessed through the lens of human security and the reproduction of violence, it appears as a mechanism for consolidating a predatory political order. This echoes Darby's concerns about peace processes that prioritise elite signatories over affected populations. The discussion therefore engages with critical scholarship questioning whose peace is being built, arguing that in South Sudan, it is unequivocally a peace for the rentier elite, maintained through the organised violence of state security forces and affiliated militias against dissenters and communities outside the patronage network. Furthermore, the discussion highlights the limitations of technical solutions ([Park, 2022](#)). Proposals for economic diversification or anti-corruption commissions, while laudable, fail if they do not first alter the political calculus of the ruling coalition. The entrenched system described by Pearson as 'organised money'—here, organised oil rents—actively co-opts or neutralises such technical fixes. The discussion thus converges on the point that sustainable peace requires a fundamental renegotiation of the social contract, a process inherently opposed by those benefiting from the predatory system. This does not presage inevitable failure, but it underscores that change will likely be driven by exogenous shocks to the oil economy or by sustained, sophisticated pressure that increases the cost of predatory behaviour beyond the benefits it confers, leveraging both material and discursive tools to support alternative visions of community and statehood.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the prevailing 'peace' in South Sudan from 2021 to 2022 is more accurately conceptualised as a predatory arrangement, wherein oil rents are the central currency of elite bargaining and the primary mechanism for reproducing organised violence ([Gussak, 2022](#)). The framework developed here moves beyond simplistic resource curse or rentier peace theses to demonstrate how the very structures of revenue distribution, forged through successive peace agreements, actively incentivise and sustain low-intensity conflict and systematic predation. The answer to the research problem is therefore that organised violence persists not despite the peace, but because of its specific, rentier-elite character. The formal cessation of large-scale civil war has given way to a fragmented, decentralised system of violent governance, where elite cohesion is purchased through oil-funded patronage, and dissent or exclusion from these circuits is met with calibrated, often delegated, force.

The implications of this predatory peace framework are significant for both theory and practice ([Darby, 2022](#)). Theoretically, it challenges linear conceptions of peacebuilding that view economic resources as merely supportive or destabilising. Instead, it posits that in contexts like South Sudan, the political economy of peace is constitutive of its violent outcomes. The peace process itself becomes a

marketplace for negotiating access to oil rents, embedding violence as a legitimate bargaining tool and a functional component of statecraft. This refines our understanding of ‘violent peace’ by grounding it in the material logic of elite accumulation. Practically, it suggests that international efforts focused solely on technical power-sharing and revenue transparency are addressing symptoms, not foundations. As long as political power and personal wealth remain synonymous with control over oil rents, the system will regenerate violence to protect and contest that control. The ‘organised money’ identified by Pearson as an old enemy of peace is, in the South Sudanese context, fundamentally organised around and by petro-revenues.

Looking forward, the trajectory from 2022 hinges on whether this predatory equilibrium can be disrupted([Pearson, 2020](#)). The framework suggests that diversification of the elite revenue base—however economically desirable—could be violently destabilising in the short term, as it threatens the rent-distribution system that maintains the brittle coalition. Conversely, a sustained drop in oil prices or production could shrink the patronage pool, triggering more intense intra-elite conflict as bargains break down. Future research must therefore examine the precise tipping points within this political marketplace. Furthermore, as Martin notes, technology alters the execution and monitoring of violence; in South Sudan, the integration of digital financial systems and surveillance into patronage networks merits close study for its potential to either entrench or expose predatory circuits. Ultimately, this analysis underscores that a transition from predatory peace to meaningful stability requires dismantling the fusion of oil wealth, political office, and military command([Goldin, 2019](#)). This is less a technical challenge than a profoundly political one, involving the construction of alternative sources of legitimacy and civic wealth that can compete with the allure of petro-patrimony. It also requires a linguistic and discursive shift, moving beyond the international community’s often uncritical adoption of the term ‘peace’ to describe the current arrangement. As Mortensen argues, linguistic constructions matter profoundly; labelling a system of organised predation as ‘peace’ can legitimise and entrench it. The next steps for scholars and policymakers alike involve using more precise, critical frameworks—like the one proposed here—to analyse, name, and address the durable economies of violence that flourish beneath the veneer of formal peace in South Sudan and similar rentier contexts.

Contributions

This article makes a dual contribution to the study of conflict and political economy in Africa. First, it advances the theoretical concept of the ‘predatory peace’ to explain how formal peace agreements can institutionalise, rather than dismantle, systems of organised violence when underpinned by oil rent distribution. Second, it provides a granular longitudinal analysis of elite bargaining in South Sudan from 2005, demonstrating how the logic of rent capture has systematically subverted state-building and reproduced militarised governance. The framework challenges conventional post-conflict models and offers a critical lens for analysing similar petro-states in the region.

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