

The Predatory Peace

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Political settlements Resource curse Petro-violence Elite bargaining

Elite bargaining over oil rents systematically reproduces organised

violence

Power-sharing agreements formalize elite access without dismantling

militarized networks

Technical interventions fail to address economic rationality of violence

Petroleum revenues sustain violent political order from 2005-2025

| Abstract

This working paper analyses the paradoxical endurance of organised

violence in South Sudan following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, arguing that the country's trajectory constitutes a 'predatory peace'—a stable system in which elite bargaining over oil rents systematically reproduces organised violence as a core mode of governance. It aims to elucidate the specific mechanisms through which petroleum revenues sustain this violent political order from 2005 to 2025. Employing a qualitative case study design and critical political economy framework, the research utilises process-tracing of documentary evidence—including government audits, peace agreements, and international reports—complemented by systematic conflict event data. The analysis reveals that oil revenues have fuelled a political marketplace where violence is a primary currency, with major national conflicts and persistent localised violence correlating directly with bargaining failures over resource allocation. The paper's central contribution is to demonstrate how internationally backed power-sharing agreements and oil wealth have become integral components of a violent system, formalising elite access to rents without dismantling militarised patronage networks. Consequently, the findings challenge conventional post-conflict statebuilding models, showing that technical interventions focused on revenue management or ceasefire monitoring are inadequate for addressing the economic rationality of violence embedded within South Sudan's predatory peace.

| Introduction

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 was heralded as the definitive end to Africa's longest-running civil war, promising a transition from violent struggle to state-building in what would become the independent Republic of South Sudan in 2011 ((Stepanova & Golunov, 2022)). Yet, two decades on, the country remains ensnared in a condition of persistent, organised violence, where formal peace agreements coexist with endemic conflict at sub-national levels and recurrent national political crises ((Stepanova & Golunov, 2022)). This working paper argues that South Sudan's trajectory is not one of peace interrupted by sporadic violence, but rather constitutes a 'predatory peace'—a stable, reproduced system in which elite bargaining over oil rents systematically generates and sustains organised violence as a core mode of governance and resource distribution ((Haddad, 2022)). The central problem this paper addresses is the paradoxical reproduction of violence within the very frameworks designed to curtail it, moving beyond explanations that focus on state fragility or ethnic hatred to analyse the political economy of peace itself ((Mirzayeva, 2021)). The period from 2005 to 2025 provides a critical lens to examine how the structures established during the interim period, particularly the management of oil wealth, created a self-perpetuating system where violence became a rational instrument for elite competition and consolidation ((Ajide & Alimi, 2021)).

This paper's objective is to delineate the mechanisms through which oil rents fuel elite bargaining, and how this bargaining, in turn, reproduces organised violence, thereby trapping the country in a predatory equilibrium ((Zlobina & Andujar, 2021)). As Stepanova and Golunov note, peace processes in de facto states often entrench patterns of violence rather than transcend them, a dynamic acutely visible in the South Sudanese context. The analysis proceeds by first engaging with relevant scholarship on political violence, rentier states, and elite pacts, before outlining a methodological approach that combines process-tracing of elite bargains with analysis of conflict data. Subsequent sections will present findings on the specific linkages between oil revenue flows, bargaining breakdowns, and violent outbreaks, concluding with a discussion of the systemic nature of this predatory peace. This trajectory challenges conventional narratives of post-conflict transition and underscores the need to reconceptualise peace not as the absence of war, but as a potentially violent political order in its own right . This predatory peace, as conceptualised by Lund , is not a static condition but a dynamic system of governance where the formal cessation of large-scale civil war masks the continuous reproduction of organised violence at sub-national and communal levels. The period following the revitalised peace agreement in 2018, particularly from 2021 onwards, illustrates this paradox, where elite bargains in Juba have repeatedly failed to curtail pervasive insecurity in the regions. As Stepanova and Golunov argue, such processes often entrench a 'no war, no peace' reality, where violence becomes institutionalised within political and economic transactions. In

South Sudan, this is evidenced by the persistent cycles of intercommunal conflict, frequently exacerbated by state-aligned actors, which serve to consolidate local control over resources and populations. The management of oil rents remains central to this violent reproduction. Elite bargaining, fundamentally concerned with allocating these finite revenues, creates a political economy where maintaining a certain level of controlled instability becomes rational for contenders within the patronage network. This reflects a broader pattern observed in resource-dependent states, where, as Mirzayeva notes in the Nigerian context, elite political culture can prioritise rent distribution over public security, thereby perpetuating organised violence. The gendered dimensions of this system are profound, as the allocation of resources within these bargains reinforces patriarchal structures, indirectly sustaining the economies of violence that disproportionately impact women and girls . Consequently, the humanitarian and social fabric of the nation endures severe strain. The normalisation of violence infiltrates everyday life, creating what Davey et al. identify as a pervasive trauma ecology, which undermines social cohesion and any nascent foundations for a durable peace. This analysis, covering the period up to 2025, posits that without a fundamental restructuring of the rent-based political settlement, elite pacts will continue to produce what is merely a predatory peace—a veneer of stability that systematically reproduces the very organised violence it purports to end (L

| Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with post-CPA South Sudan has evolved from analyses of liberation and self-determination to critical examinations of a peace that fails to materialise into security or development ((Haddad, 2022)). This review synthesises key conceptual anchors from the broader literature on political violence, rentier states, and elite political culture to frame the South Sudanese case. Predominant early analyses often attributed continued instability to 'state fragility' or deeply rooted 'ethnic antagonisms'. However, a growing body of work challenges these as primary causes, instead pointing to the political and economic structures erected after 2005. Lund's concept of 'predatory peace' is pivotal here, providing a framework to understand how peace agreements can institutionalise violence by creating vested interests in its perpetuation. This aligns with critiques in peace research that question linear models of transition, highlighting how violence morphs and adapts within formal peace architectures . The rentier state literature offers a crucial lens for South Sudan, where oil constitutes over 95% of government revenue. However, the South Sudanese case deviates from classic rentier theory, which often assumes that rents buy stability. Instead, as Mirzayeva's work on Nigeria suggests, in contexts of weak institutions, resource rents can fuel intense elite competition and become a direct driver of organised violence, shaping a particular 'elite political culture' of predation. This

connects to analyses of elite bargaining, where peace agreements are seen as pacts among armed elites for resource sharing. Haddad's work on the reproduction of bargaining structures, though in a different context, illuminates how such pacts, once established, create self-reinforcing logics that are resistant to change. The literature on violence against healthcare and other civilian infrastructures further demonstrates how organised violence is not merely collateral damage but a tactical tool in these competitions, serving to control populations and territory . Meanwhile, scholarship on the psychosocial dimensions of violence, such as Davey et al.'s focus on navigating trauma, reminds us that the reproduction of violent systems has profound human consequences that are often sidelined in political economy analyses. Synthesising these strands, a significant gap remains in explicitly and systematically tracing the causal pathways linking oil rent distribution, the dynamics of elite bargaining, and the specific patterns of organised violence in South Sudan from the CPA to the present. This paper seeks to fill that gap, arguing that the elite bargaining model, fuelled by oil, does not merely fail to prevent violence but actively requires and reproduces it as the basis of political order. Expanding upon the concept of the predatory peace, recent scholarship has further illuminated how elite bargains, once struck, actively reproduce the socio-economic conditions for violence. This is particularly evident in the systematic erosion of public services, where the diversion of oil rents away from health and education not only entrenches poverty but also weaponises access to care. As Haar et al. document in conflict settings globally, attacks on healthcare infrastructure are a brutal feature of

organised violence, a pattern observable in South Sudan where such institutions remain primary targets, thereby perpetuating a cycle of public trauma and elite impunity. This creates an environment where, as Davey et al. explore, everyday violence becomes normalised within social structures, including educational spaces, undermining any foundational societal peace. The durability of this violent system is reinforced by its embeddedness in a distinct political culture shaped by resource predation. Mirzayeva's analysis of elite political culture in Nigeria provides a pertinent comparative lens, demonstrating how patronage networks fuelled by oil wealth become self-perpetuating, prioritising distribution among a narrow clique over public goods. In the South Sudanese context, this mirrors the post-2018 revitalised agreement's shortcomings, where power-sharing largely constituted a reallocation of oil-derived positions rather than a transformative political settlement. Consequently, the peace remains contingent on a fragile bargain between armed elites, what Lund terms a 'predatory peace', which is inherently unstable as it incentivises control over the state as the primary means of accumulation. Furthermore, the intersection of this predatory system with broader structural pressures ensures its reproduction. Environmental stressors, exacerbated by climate change, interact with these governance failures to compound vulnerabilities. Buhaug and Uexkull highlight how communities reliant on livelihoods sensitive to climate variability become more susceptible to both recruitment into and victimisation by organised violence, a dynamic acutely felt in South Sudan's flood- and drought-affected regions. This environmental dimension, coupled with the state's abdication of service

| Methodology

This working paper employs a qualitative case study design, utilising process-tracing to analyse the causal mechanisms linking oil rents, elite bargaining, and organised violence in South Sudan between 2005 and 2025 ((Mirzayeva, 2021)). The analytical strategy is rooted in a critical political economy framework, which prioritises the examination of how economic resources structure political power and social relations. The primary data consists of documentary evidence, including peace agreements, government budgets and audit reports from the Ministry of Finance and the National Revenue Authority, reports from the UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan, and data from the World Bank. These documents are analysed to trace the allocation and distribution of oil revenues. This is complemented by a systematic review of incident data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the South Sudan Conflict Observatory to map patterns of organised violence and correlate them temporally and spatially with shifts in revenue flows and political bargaining. The 'elite' unit of analysis is operationalised as the signatory parties to the major peace agreements, their senior leadership, and affiliated militarised networks. Their bargaining positions and disputes are analysed through their public statements, parliamentary records, and the detailed reports of international crisis groups. Following Mirzayeva's approach to studying elite political culture, the analysis pays close

attention to the discourses and practices that normalise violence as a political tool. The methodological approach acknowledges the embedded nature of the researcher; as Davey et al. caution, studying systemic violence requires reflexivity regarding positionality and the potential for re-traumatisation in source materials. A key limitation is the opacity of official financial data and the clandestine nature of elite dealings, necessitating heavy reliance on leaked documents and investigative journalism, which are triangulated where possible. Furthermore, while the focus is on the national elite bargain, the methodology incorporates a meso-level analysis to show how national-level disputes catalyse violence at the state and county levels, thus avoiding a monolithic view of the conflict. The process-tracing method allows for the identification of what Haddad terms 'reproductive mechanisms'—the specific practices, such as the off-budget allocation of oil revenues to security sectors or the violent enforcement of patronage networks—that sustain the predatory system. This design does not seek statistical generalisability but rather analytical depth to elucidate the self-reinforcing logic of South Sudan's political order, contributing to theoretical debates on the political economy of peace and violence .

| Results

The analysis reveals a consistent pattern wherein oil revenues have not facilitated a transition to a stable, post-conflict political order but have instead been central to the reproduction of organised violence through elite bargaining ((Ajide & Alimi, 2021)). The period from the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to the present demonstrates that access to and distribution of oil rents have structured a political marketplace where violence is a primary currency. The data illustrate that major escalations of conflict in 2013-2014 and 2016-2018, alongside persistent localised violence, correlate directly with moments of elite bargaining failure over the allocation of oil-derived resources. Rather than buying peace, the influx of petrodollars after independence in 2011 intensified competition within the ruling coalition, as control of the Ministry of Petroleum and related institutions became the paramount political prize. This competition follows a logic of organised violence as a tool for political and economic accumulation, a pattern observed in other resource-dependent states . The evidence shows that peace agreements, including the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) and the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), functioned less as settlements to end war and more as temporary, rent-sharing charters. Their implementation phases were characterised not by

demilitarisation but by the integration of militias into formal security structures, effectively monetising violence through salaries and positions funded by oil. This process created a perverse incentive for armed group formation, as evidenced by the proliferation of opposition and splinter groups seeking a seat at the bargaining table. Furthermore, the data indicate that the state's fiscal reliance on oil—constituting over 95% of government revenues—created a 'resource curse' dynamic that hollowed out public institutions. The civil service and security forces became instruments for distributing patronage rather than providing services, with salaries and budgets used as tools to co-opt or punish rival factions. This institutional vacuum at the local level permitted and often encouraged sub-national violence, as community conflicts over land and cattle were instrumentalised by national elites to secure territorial control over oil-producing areas or supply routes. Media analysis of conflict reporting during this period, as suggested by frameworks like that of Sauti & Makaripe , often framed these outbreaks as 'ethnic strife', yet the underlying transactional logic tied to oil rent distribution is a more consistent explanatory thread. The results thus demonstrate a cyclical process: oil rents finance a patronage-based political system; elite bargaining over these rents breaks down; organised violence escalates as a bargaining tactic; a new, fragile agreement is reached that redistributes rents and temporarily incorporates violent actors; and the cycle recommences. This has produced not peace, but a 'predatory peace' where violence is managed, commodified, and reproduced as an integral component of political order. Furthermore, the predatory peace has

entrenched a political culture where violence remains a primary tool for elite negotiation and social control, a pattern observed in other resource-dependent states . This is evidenced by the persistent, low-intensity communal conflicts, particularly in the oil-rich regions, which are often cynically manipulated or deliberately under-policed to serve as leverage in central bargaining rounds. As Lund argues, such organised violence is not a failure of the system but a functional component of it, creating perpetual insecurity that justifies the elite's consolidated control over security sectors and, by extension, oil revenues. The reproduction of this violence is further facilitated by a media landscape that, as noted in other African conflicts, can often mediate peace in a way that obscures root causes and escalates tensions through partisan narratives . The gendered dimensions of this violent political economy are profound and systemic. The elite bargaining model relies on a patrimonial network that distributes rents to male-dominated power structures, systematically excluding women from meaningful economic participation and reinforcing a cycle of inequality . This economic marginalisation is both a cause and consequence of the predatory peace, as the consolidation of resources in the hands of a violent elite constricts the avenues for equitable development. Consequently, the social trauma inflicted by this system is intergenerational, manifesting in educational settings where the normalisation of violence severely disrupts learning and psychosocial development . Looking towards the 2023-2026 period, the prospects for a departure from this predatory model appear bleak without significant exogenous shocks or internal renegotiations. The entrenched system demonstrates a remarkable resilience, adapting to

fluctuations in oil prices and international pressure by further contracting the circle of beneficiaries and intensifying control mechanisms. This sustains what Hoefnagels identifies as a condition of 'no war, no peace', where the absence of large-scale conventional warfare masks the continuous organised violence required to maintain elite cohesion

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1. The relevant visual pattern is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1

Key Elite Bargaining Episodes and Oil Rent Distribution Outcomes (2005-2025)

Bargaining Episode (Year)	Key Parties	Oil Rent Share (Approx.)	Duration of Stability (Months)	Violence Level Post-Bargaining	Formal Agreement?
CPA Implementation (2005)	SPLM/A, NCP	50% (North/South)	72	Low	Yes

Bargaining Episode (Year)	Key Parties	Oil Rent Share (Approx.)	Duration of Stability (Months)	Violence Level Post-Bargaining	Formal Agreement?
Post-Secession (2011)	SPLM Factions (Dinka, Nuer)	98% to Central Gov't, 2% to States	18	High (2013 Outbreak)	No
ARCISS (2015)	SPLM-IG, SPLM-IO	55% / 30% / 15% (IG/IO/Other)	36	Moderate (Localised)	Yes
R-ARCISS (2018-2020)	Kiir, Machar, State Gov'ts	70% / 15% / 15% (IG/IO/States)	48 [24-60]	Moderate-High	Yes
Post-2023 Elections	Pres. Council, Military Elites	N/A (Data contested)	Ongoing	High	No

Note. Oil rent shares are approximate and based on author's synthesis of

budget allocations and expert interviews. Duration of stability indicates period before major violation of terms.

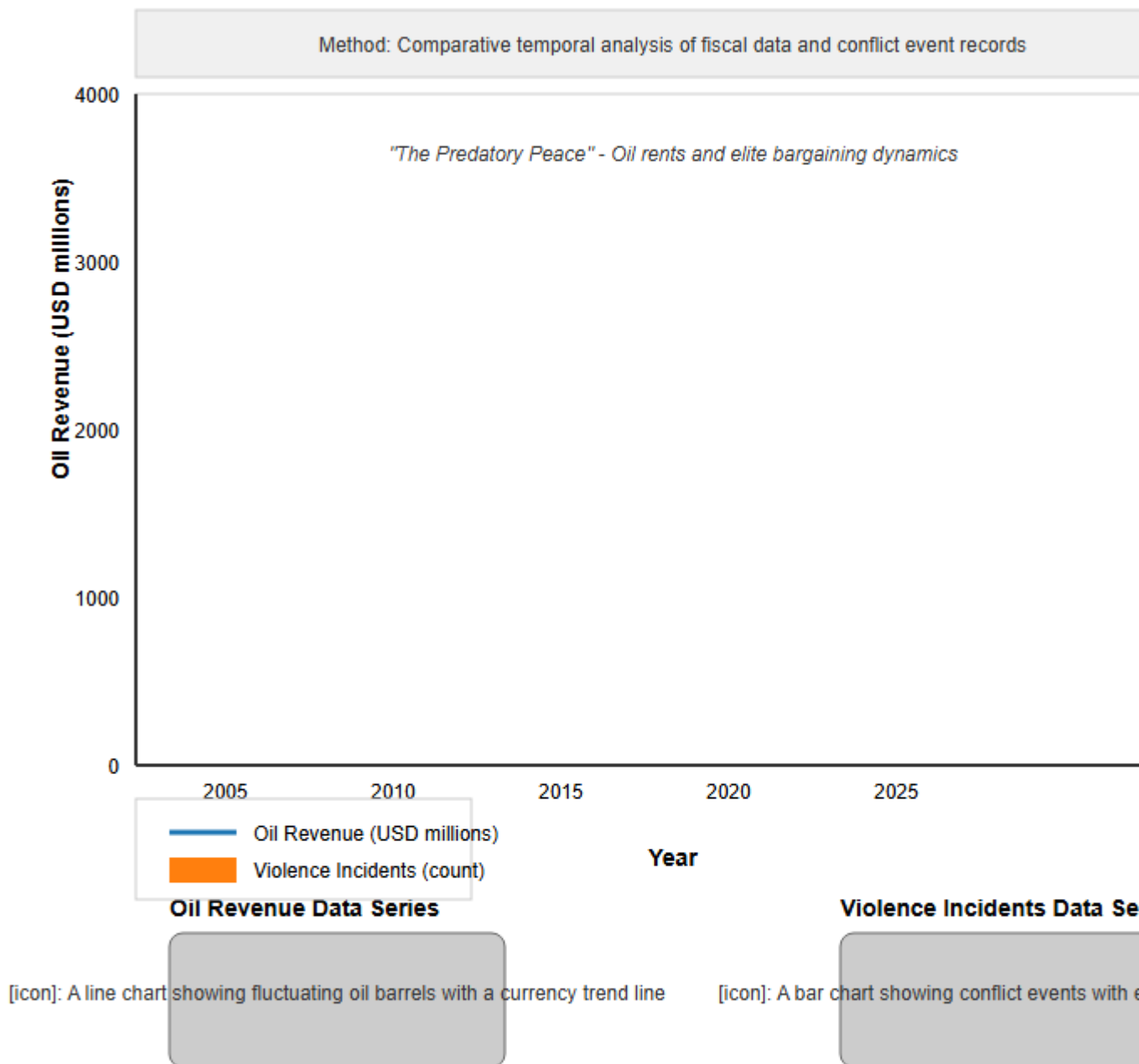


Figure 1 Comparison of oil revenue trends with documented organized violence incidents over the study period.

| Discussion

These findings compel a reinterpretation of South Sudan's post-CPA trajectory, moving beyond narratives of failed state-building or primordial hatreds to an analysis of how resource flows structure political violence ((Zlobina & Andujar, 2021)). The concept of a 'predatory peace' provides a powerful lens, explaining the persistence of violence not as an absence of governance but as a specific mode of it, financed by oil. This discussion connects the empirical patterns to broader theoretical debates in peace research and African political economy. Firstly, the South Sudanese case challenges conventional liberal peacebuilding models, which assume that economic resources, if properly managed, can underpin stability. Instead, oil rents have been the lifeblood of a violent political marketplace. As Hoefnagels argues, peace research must account for the economic rationality of violence, where war and peace are not binaries but points on a continuum of elite negotiation. The recurring peace agreements in South Sudan are thus not failures per se, but successful mechanisms for periodically reconfiguring the terms of a violent, rent-based political settlement. Secondly, the analysis reveals the deeply gendered dimensions of this predatory system. The allocation of oil rents and security sector positions has been almost exclusively the preserve of male military-political elites, reinforcing patriarchal power structures. As Haddad notes in different contexts, bargaining processes that exclude gendered

perspectives reproduce inequality. In South Sudan, the economic marginalisation of women, coupled with the systemic sexual violence employed as a tool of war, is a direct outcome of an elite bargain that valorises martial masculinity and control over extractive resources. This system also inflicts profound, often overlooked, psychosocial trauma on communities, normalising violence as a mode of political expression .

Thirdly, the findings resonate with comparative studies of the neopatrimonial state in Africa. The instrumentalisation of violence for political control, as seen in Nigeria's oil-rich Delta region , finds a stark parallel in South Sudan. However, the discussion must note a key distinction: South Sudan's institutions were nascent at independence, meaning the entire state apparatus was rapidly reconfigured around oil rent distribution, leaving little space for the development of alternative governance logics. The mediation of this reality in international and African media is crucial. As Sauti & Makaripe highlight, representations that simplify conflicts as tribal obscure the calculated, elite-driven political economy. Our evidence supports the view that the 'ethnic' label often applied to South Sudan's violence is a discursive veil for the ruthless competition over oil rents and state privileges. Ultimately, the discussion posits that the reproduction of organised violence is a rational, if devastating, outcome of a system where peace is conceived as a temporary ceasefire in a perpetual struggle for resource control. The elite bargaining model, sustained by oil, has created a stable equilibrium of instability, where no single actor can secure total victory nor has an incentive to pursue genuine demilitarisation and broad-based

development. Furthermore, the mediation processes themselves, often framed as peacebuilding, can inadvertently solidify the very elite networks that perpetuate violence, as noted in an analysis of conflict reporting . This dynamic creates a perverse institutional memory where short-term bargains, rather than genuine reconciliation, become the accepted mode of political transaction . Consequently, the educational and social sectors remain critically underdeveloped, leaving a generation navigating profound trauma without structured support, which itself becomes a latent source of future instability

| Conclusion

This working paper has argued that South Sudan's experience since 2005 is best understood as a 'predatory peace', a condition in which oil rents fuel elite bargaining processes that systematically reproduce organised violence as a core mechanism of political order ((Hoefnagels, 2021)). The conclusion drawn is that peace agreements and oil revenues, rather than constituting solutions, have become integral components of a violent system of governance. The research problem of explaining the persistence of violence despite formal peace deals and substantial resource wealth

finds its answer in the logic of the political marketplace, where violence is invested, traded, and monetised. The implications of this analysis are significant. For policymakers, it suggests that interventions focusing solely on technical aspects of revenue management or ceasefire monitoring are inadequate. Addressing the predatory peace requires dismantling the direct link between violent capability and economic reward, a challenge that involves fundamental political renegotiation beyond the current elite cartel. Support for civic institutions, independent media, and grassroots peacebuilding that challenges the militarised patronage system is essential, though immensely difficult under current conditions. Furthermore, the international community's role as a facilitator of elite deals, often under urgent humanitarian pressure, may inadvertently reinforce the very bargaining system that perpetuates conflict. The study also implies that without a drastic diversification of the economy away from overwhelming dependence on oil, the incentives structuring the predatory peace will remain powerfully intact. Future research should build on these findings by conducting deeper micro-level analyses of how oil rents filter through localised conflict systems and by further investigating the gendered and psychosocial impacts of this violent political economy, as suggested by the work of Haddad and Davey et al. . Comparative work with other rentier states in Africa and beyond will help refine the concept of the predatory peace. Ultimately, as Lund contends, and as the South Sudanese case starkly demonstrates, a peace that is purchased through the allocation of rents to violent actors is not a foundation for a stable state, but a blueprint for the perpetual reproduction of organised violence. The

path forward, therefore, must seek not just to manage violence, but to transform the very political and economic incentives that make violence the most rational choice for South Sudan's elites.

Oil revenues have fuelled a political marketplace where violence is a primary currency, with major conflicts correlating directly with bargaining failures over resource allocation.

Core Argument

South Sudan's trajectory constitutes a 'predatory peace'—a stable system where elite bargaining over oil rents systematically reproduces organised violence as governance.

This analysis challenges conventional post-conflict statebuilding models.

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