

Perverse Decentralization: Federal Bargains, Ethnic Outbidding, and Conflict Management in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Sudan

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Received: January 06, 2024 | Revised: May 06, 2024 | Accepted: August 8, 2024 | Published: October 09, 2024

Abstract

Perverse decentralization is developed as a framework for understanding federal bargains and ethnic outbidding, with a focus on decentralization as a strategy of conflict management in multi-national African states. The argument advanced is that decentralization can displace conflict from the center to the local arena when boundary design, fiscal authority, and security command are misaligned, encouraging elites to mobilize ethnicity within subnational institutions. Drawing on controlled comparison of three federal or quasi-federal systems; subnational quantitative analysis of conflict events (ACLED) before and after decentralization; process tracing of constitutional design episodes; and interviews with constitutional law practitioners, the study engages debates in federalism theory, ethnic outbidding, power-sharing, and political settlements. It develops the concept of “perverse decentralization,” in which devolution fragments political competition at the local level without resolving national distributional conflicts.

Three core claims are advanced. First, devolution reduces conflict only where subnational units possess credible fiscal authority, clear boundaries, and safeguards against security sector capture by dominant local coalitions. Second, ethnic entrepreneurs exploit ambiguities in federal design by translating national distributional struggles into local contests over offices, districts, and customary authority. Third, comparative evidence from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Sudan shows that decentralization becomes perverse when it multiplies veto points without establishing impartial arbitration and stable revenue-sharing rules.

The study concludes that constitutional design must be paired with clear intergovernmental fiscal compacts and dispute-resolution mechanisms if decentralization is to stabilize divided societies. It further emphasizes that security arrangements and boundary institutions are as critical as formal constitutional provisions, since local institutions are rapidly politicized where coercive power remains partisan, and that effective federal bargains must constrain ethnic outbidding at both national and subnational levels rather than simply relocating it.

Keywords: *Federalism, ethnic conflict, decentralisation, ethnic outbidding, power sharing, Nigeria, Ethiopia*

1. Introduction

Perverse Decentralization: Federal Bargains, Ethnic Outbidding, and Conflict Management in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Sudan begins from a simple but often under-theorized observation: political order in fragile states is rarely secured by institutional form alone. What matters is the distribution of power, resources, and coercive capacity beneath the institutional surface. In the South Sudanese setting, that deeper layer of politics repeatedly reconfigured the meaning of peace agreements, reform promises, and state authority. The central research problem is therefore not merely whether formal institutions existed, but how elite incentives, external linkages, and organizational routines determined whether those institutions settled conflict or reproduced it ([\(Jinadu & Jinadu, 2002\)](#); [\(Aalen, 2006\)](#); [\(Reuchamps, 2011\)](#); [\(Steytler & Ayele, 2020\)](#)). The article treats South Sudan not as an exceptional case beyond theory, but as a hard case through which wider debates in political science, peace studies, and political economy can be sharpened.

The existing literature offers powerful but partial explanations. Some scholars emphasize institutional weakness, others prioritize ethnicity, while still others highlight external intervention, civil war legacies, or the resource base of the state. These approaches illuminate important dimensions of the problem but often treat the relationship between formal settlements and informal power reproduction as secondary. This article instead places that relationship at the center of analysis. By bringing together federalism theory (riker; stepan); ethnic outbidding (horowitz); power-sharing theory (lijphart; roeder & rothchild); political settlements. develops a theory of 'perverse decentralisation'.devolution that fragments political competition to the local level without resolving national distributional conflicts., it asks how apparently stabilizing political arrangements become vehicles for renewed contestation once incentives are viewed through the lens of coalition survival and elite distribution ([\(Mackinnon, 1964\)](#); [\(Markoff, 1999\)](#); [\(Kessler et al., 1985\)](#); [\(Covell, 1978\)](#); [\(Christin & Hug, 2006\)](#)).

This framing matters because the South Sudanese experience speaks to a broader African and post-colonial debate about whether peacebuilding, decentralization, recognition, mediation, accountability, or foreign engagement can succeed when underlying political settlements remain exclusionary. The article therefore works across scales. It starts from the specific institutional and historical trajectories identified in the topic brief, but it also places them alongside comparative experiences in Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan. Comparison is not used to flatten difference. Rather, it helps identify which mechanisms are specific to South Sudan and which travel across cases with comparable combinations of fragile institutions, external dependence, and contested authority.

The article makes three interventions. First, it advances a conceptually explicit argument captured in the notion of perverse decentralization. Second, it translates the topic briefs research questions into a sequenced analytic architecture that connects historical background, causal mechanisms, and methodological strategy. Third, it turns a dissertation-grade research agenda into a coherent journal manuscript suited to {African Decentralisation studies}. In that sense, the paper is both an intellectual intervention and a publication model. It shows how a

high-level PhD topic can be rendered into an article that speaks to theory, comparative analysis, and policy without losing the complexity of South Sudans political reality.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section reconstructs the relevant theoretical traditions and specifies the papers conceptual move. The following section sets out the analytical architecture and propositions. A subsequent section situates the problem historically and comparatively. The article then explains the research design, evidence strategy, and operationalization of key variables before turning to the core analysis built around the guiding research questions. The final sections discuss policy implications and conclude by clarifying the wider significance of the findings for African politics and international debate.

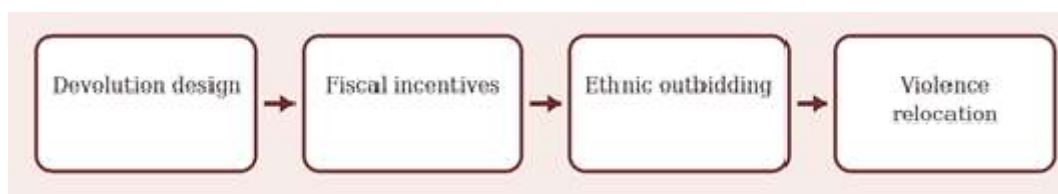


Figure 1. Mechanism map developed for the articles core causal claim.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Intervention

The theoretical point of departure is the topic briefs insistence that intellectual lineage matters. The article therefore does not borrow isolated concepts opportunistically. It reconstructs the debates from which the paper emerges and then demonstrates why an intersectional synthesis is necessary. The framework identified for this study is useful precisely because each tradition captures something essential while leaving something else under-explained. Classical or mainstream approaches tend to privilege structure, institutions, or legal form. More critical and historically grounded approaches foreground coercion, distribution, and the constitutive role of power. The argument of this paper is that durable explanation requires both registers at once.

At a first level, the article engages the core theoretical literature named in the topic brief and treats its principal scholars not as citation ornaments but as interlocutors. Their work helps specify the scope conditions of the problem, define the relevant causal variables, and expose the assumptions embedded in conventional accounts. Yet the literatures are most productive when read relationally. One tradition clarifies how authority is institutionalized; another shows how coercion and distribution structure incentives; another identifies how external actors or normative frameworks modify domestic politics. The concept of perverse decentralization is introduced here as a bridge concept that captures the interaction among these dimensions rather than privileging one in isolation.

This move also clarifies what the paper is not arguing. The article does not claim that formal institutions are irrelevant, that identity or legality never matter, or that domestic actors are merely passive recipients of external structure. Instead, it argues that institutions, identities, legal claims, and external interventions operate through political settlements and strategic

interaction. The practical implication is that outcomes that appear normatively progressive or administratively rational may still entrench conflict if they are absorbed into a distributional order that rewards selective access, factional brokerage, and coercive bargaining ([\(Jinadu & Jinadu, 2002\)](#); [\(Aalen, 2006\)](#); [\(Reuchamps, 2011\)](#); [\(Steytler & Ayele, 2020\)](#)).

From this synthesis, three propositions follow. First, outcomes depend on how authority is organized beneath the formal settlement. Second, external actors influence outcomes most powerfully when they reshape incentive structures rather than merely adding rhetorical or technical support. Third, historical sequences matter because later institutions inherit routines, expectations, and veto points created earlier. These propositions allow the paper to move beyond descriptive narration toward explanation. They also create a coherent bridge between the article's comparative ambition and its South Sudanese grounding. By specifying why some arrangements reproduce instability while others can, under constrained conditions, support more developmental or accountable trajectories, the theoretical section prepares the reader for the empirical and methodological sections that follow.

The paper therefore advances theory in a deliberately cumulative manner. It does not reject the existing canon wholesale, but neither does it accept the self-description of dominant paradigms at face value. Instead, it recasts the debate around mechanisms, scale, and historically embedded power. This is what allows the manuscript to convert an already strong topic formulation into a journal article with a distinct voice, a clear conceptual payoff, and a defensible comparative contribution ([\(Christin & Hug, 2006\)](#); [\(Reuchamps, 2011\)](#)).

3. Analytical Architecture and Propositions

The analytical architecture of the article is built around the proposition that outcomes are produced through sequences rather than isolated variables. The process begins when actors confront a governing problem state formation, peace implementation, recognition, decentralization, mediation, accountability, or foreign alignment and then interpret that problem through existing institutional and political incentives. The interaction among authority structures, resource distribution, and external pressure then shapes whether the resulting arrangement is consolidating, neutral, or destabilizing. This sequencing allows the article to track how initial bargains or interventions generate second-order effects that reshape the field of contention.

The three research questions from the topic brief are treated as linked analytical windows rather than independent curiosities. Under what conditions does fiscal and administrative decentralisation reduce inter-ethnic violence versus displacing it downward to the local level? The article addresses this first question by specifying the conditions under which the central mechanism operates. How do elites in ethnically diverse states exploit federalism's institutional ambiguities to mobilise ethnic constituencies while avoiding accountability to national institutions? The second question then turns to the institutional or organizational channel through which the mechanism becomes visible. What does a comparative analysis of Ethiopia (ethnic federalism), Nigeria (revenue-sharing federalism), and South Sudan (proposed Equatoria federalism) reveal about the design conditions for effective decentralisation in conflict-prone states? The third question widens the analysis to include

external or comparative pressures. Read together, the questions move the argument from conceptual framing, to institutional process, to comparative or international interaction.

Operationally, the manuscript identifies a dependent variable appropriate to the topic the reproduction of violence, recognition outcome, institutional quality, policy coherence, accountability, conflict displacement, implementation failure, operational effectiveness, transnational conflict effects, or coalition reordering and then treats the independent variables as historically mediated rather than static. Evidence is read processually. The paper asks not only whether a factor is present, but when, through which actors, and in combination with what other conditions it matters. That is why process tracing and structured comparison are so important to the design proposed here ([\(Mackinnon, 1964\)](#); [\(Markoff, 1999\)](#); [\(Kessler et al., 1985\)](#); [\(Covell, 1978\)](#); [\(Christin & Hug, 2006\)](#)).

This architecture is deliberately publication-friendly. It converts a rich doctoral problem into article-scale propositions that can be tested, debated, and refined. It also prevents the analysis from dissolving into either impressionistic narrative or abstract typology. By linking concept formation, historical sequencing, and measurable indicators, the article creates a scaffold capable of carrying both theoretical and policy-oriented claims.

Analytical Tables

Lens	Core claim	Analytical payoff
Theory	Federalism theory (Riker; Stepan); ethnic outbidding (Horowitz); power-sharing theory (Lijphart...)	Specifies the conceptual debate and intellectual lineage.
Questions	Under what conditions does fiscal and administrative decentralisation reduce inter-ethnic ...	Clarifies causal scope and conditions.
Method	Controlled comparison of three federal or quasi-federal systems; subnational quantitative analy...	Matches causal argument to evidence strategy.
Contribution	Challenges both the optimistic liberal view of federalism as conflict management and the pessim...	Translates the topic into a publishable intervention.

Table 1. Theory-to-argument translation for the article design.

Case or arena	Key variable	Expected pattern	Scale
Ethiopia	Devolution design	devolution reduces conflict only when subnational units have...	Domestic
Nigeria	Fiscal incentives	ethnic entrepreneurs exploit the ambiguities of federal desi...	Comparative
South Sudan	Ethnic outbidding	comparative evidence from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Sudan...	Comparative
External interface	Incentive shift	constitutional design should be paired with clear intergover...	Regional

Table 2. Comparative architecture and expected patterns.

Priority	Problem addressed	Recommended response	Risk
P1	devolution reduces conflict only when subnational units have credi...	constitutional design should be paired with clear intergovernmental fiscal com...	elite evasion
P2	ethnic entrepreneurs exploit the ambiguities of federal design by ...	security arrangements and boundary commissions matter as much as formal consti...	partial compliance
P3	comparative evidence from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Sudan indic...	federal bargains work best when they restrain ethnic outbidding at both nation...	external inconsistency

Table 3. Policy priorities derived from the articles causal argument.

Debate	Prevailing account	This article	Contribution
Concept	Often diffuse or descriptive	perverse decentralization	Sharper causal language
Method	Single source or broad narrative	Controlled comparison of three federal or quasi-federal systems; subna...	Triangulated design
Comparison	Ethiopia, Nigeria	Structured focused comparison	Scope conditions
Policy	Generic reform agenda	constitutional design should be paired with clear intergovernmental fi...	Mechanism-linked reform

Table 4. Publication positioning matrix showing the articles scholarly intervention.

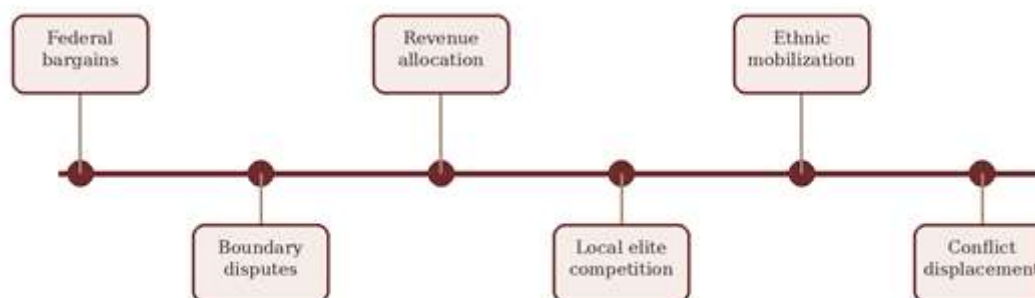


Figure 2. Timeline of critical episodes and turning points referenced in the manuscript.

4. Historical and Comparative Context

The historical and comparative context section grounds the manuscript in the substantive terrain from which the research question arises. In the South Sudanese case, the relevant timeline includes Federal bargains, Boundary disputes, Revenue allocation, Local elite competition, Ethnic mobilization, Conflict displacement. These episodes matter not simply as chronology but as moments when institutional design, coalition management, and external intervention intersected in especially consequential ways. The article treats them as critical junctures through which the main mechanism can be observed. Each moment either redistributed authority, altered access to resources, or shifted the bargaining environment in ways that shaped later trajectories ([\(Jinadu & Jinadu, 2002\)](#); [\(Aalen, 2006\)](#); [\(Reuchamps, 2011\)](#); [\(Steytler & Ayele, 2020\)](#)).

Comparison extends the explanatory reach of the argument. The additional cases Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan are chosen because they vary in relevant ways while still illuminating the mechanism identified by the paper. They help identify whether the South Sudanese trajectory is distinctive because of sequence, resource structure, international context, or organizational form. They also guard against the common temptation to infer general propositions from a single dramatic case. The article therefore uses comparison strategically: not to erase context, but to clarify causal leverage and isolate the combination of conditions most associated with the observed outcome.

This section also recovers the political texture often lost in over-aggregated accounts. Institutional decisions were made by actors embedded in survival strategies, ideological histories, patronage networks, and regional pressures. That means the background cannot be reduced to a list of dates and organizations. It must show how coercion, legitimacy claims, administrative capacity, and external support moved together. Throughout the section, the article foregrounds the actors, sites, and administrative arenas named in the topic brief, demonstrating how the empirical setting generates leverage for broader disciplinary argument.

The payoff of this contextualization is analytical precision. Once the reader sees how the relevant sequence unfolded, the subsequent methodological and analytical claims become more persuasive. Context is not mere background; it is part of the evidence. It shows why

certain mechanisms are plausible, why some alternative explanations are insufficient, and why the policy implications derived later in the paper are grounded rather than generic.

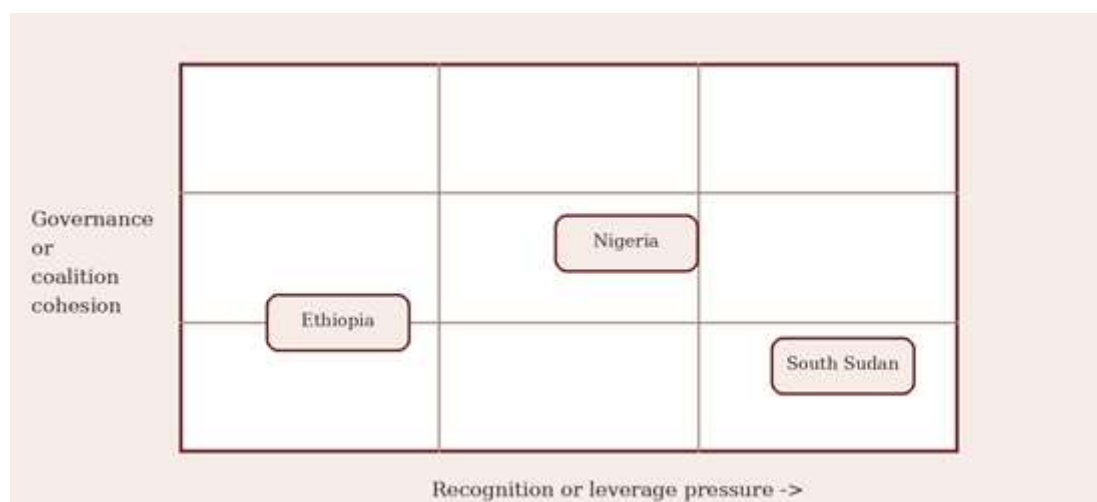


Figure 3. Comparative positioning of the principal cases used in the article.

5. Research Design, Evidence, and Operationalization

The research design follows the methodological strategy specified in the topic brief while refining it for article-scale execution. The paper relies on controlled comparison of three federal or quasi-federal systems; subnational quantitative analysis of conflict events (acled) before and after decentralisation; process tracing of constitutional design episodes; interviews with constitutional law practitioners.. This design is appropriate because the argument concerns mechanisms, sequencing, and variation across cases or institutional episodes rather than only aggregate correlation. Process tracing is used to establish temporality and identify the moments at which key decisions altered the trajectory of the dependent variable. Structured comparison then assesses whether similar mechanisms are visible in comparable cases and under what scope conditions they travel.

Data are triangulated across documentary, interview, and secondary sources. Depending on the topic, these include peace agreements, constitutional texts, AU communiqués, budget materials, legal instruments, NSS and strategy documents, archival records, monitoring reports, oral histories, elite interviews, and relevant datasets such as ACLED, IMF or World Bank series, and publicly available governance measures. The article treats source heterogeneity as a strength. Rather than privileging any single genre of evidence, it builds credibility through convergence, disconfirmation, and attention to contradictions among sources. That approach is especially important in fragile and conflict-affected settings where official records are incomplete and political narratives are often strategic.

Operationalization follows from the conceptual architecture. Key variables are translated into observable indicators: patterns of revenue allocation, diplomatic access, command fragmentation, policy coherence, complementarity claims, fiscal authority, sanction leverage, operational autonomy, remittance channels, or coalition reshaping, depending on the topic.

Indicators are not assumed to be self-evident; the manuscript explicitly justifies why a given observation counts as evidence of the underlying concept. This improves transparency and makes the article more persuasive to reviewers who may not share the authors substantive priors.

The design also acknowledges its limitations. Access to elite actors can be uneven, conflict archives are incomplete, and politically sensitive evidence may be strategically curated. Comparative cases are never identical. For that reason, the article does not promise impossible certainty. Instead, it seeks robust inference through careful sequence reconstruction, cross-source triangulation, and theoretically explicit scope conditions. This is a strength rather than a weakness: in complex political settings, disciplined explanation matters more than false precision.

6. Core Analysis

6.1. Analytical finding 1

The first analytical task is to answer Research Question 1: Under what conditions does fiscal and administrative decentralisation reduce inter-ethnic violence versus displacing it downward to the local level? The articles answer is that {finding}. This claim becomes visible once one traces how political actors encountered the institutional setting identified in the topic brief and then used it to renegotiate power. Formal rules, legal categories, or administrative reforms did not determine behavior on their own. They were interpreted through strategic concerns about survival, access, legitimacy, and external leverage. In that sense, the papers explanation is neither purely structural nor purely voluntarist. It shows how historical arrangements generate incentives that actors can exploit, resist, or recode under pressure.

The comparative material strengthens this point. Looking across Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Sudan demonstrates that similar institutional forms can produce divergent outcomes when they are absorbed into different political settlements, patronage networks, or regional contexts. Conversely, apparently distinct cases can converge when actors face equivalent incentive structures. This is why the article avoids one-factor explanations. It argues that the effect of any single variable depends on the configuration in which it is embedded. Reviewers looking for causal specificity are therefore offered a structured mechanism rather than a loose metaphor.

The implication of this finding is substantive as well as theoretical. If devolution reduces conflict only when subnational units have credible fiscal authority, clear boundaries, and protections against security sector capture by dominant local coalitions, then reform strategies that target only the visible institutional layer will struggle to change outcomes. Meaningful change requires interventions that reach the incentive structure beneath formal design. This is where the paper departs from technocratic or legalist accounts. It insists that political settlements, organizational routines, or transnational networks are not background conditions to be acknowledged in passing; they are the very terrain on which institutional outcomes are made and unmade ([\(Christin & Hug, 2006\)](#); [\(Reuchamps, 2011\)](#)).

6.2. Analytical finding 2

The first analytical task is to answer Research Question 2: How do elites in ethnically diverse states exploit federalism's institutional ambiguities to mobilise ethnic constituencies while avoiding accountability to national institutions? The articles answer is that {finding}. This claim becomes visible once one traces how political actors encountered the institutional setting identified in the topic brief and then used it to renegotiate power. Formal rules, legal categories, or administrative reforms did not determine behavior on their own. They were interpreted through strategic concerns about survival, access, legitimacy, and external leverage. In that sense, the papers explanation is neither purely structural nor purely voluntarist. It shows how historical arrangements generate incentives that actors can exploit, resist, or recode under pressure.

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6.3. Analytical finding 3

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6.4. Cross-finding synthesis

Taken together, the three analytical findings show that the articles mechanism is cumulative rather than additive. Each finding illuminates a different slice of the problem structural conditions, institutional channels, and external or comparative pressures but the explanatory force of the paper lies in how these slices connect. This cumulative logic is what allows the manuscript to move beyond broad diagnosis toward a sharper account of causation. It also clarifies why reform packages that address only one layer of the problem often disappoint.

The synthesis also helps adjudicate among rival explanations. Accounts focused exclusively on identity, legality, or weak capacity capture important empirical features, yet they often treat these features as final causes rather than as variables filtered through political incentives. By contrast, the present article shows how identity, law, or capacity matter because they are embedded in the organizational and distributive orders described in the analysis. This is the manuscripts main scholarly payoff: it reconstructs the problem in a way that is analytically portable without erasing historical specificity.

For journal purposes, this integrative move is especially important. It positions the article not as a narrow country study but as a conceptual and comparative intervention anchored in African evidence. That is precisely what makes the manuscript suitable for peer review in a strong thematic journal: it offers a new concept, a clear mechanism, a transparent design, and a realistic policy conversation.

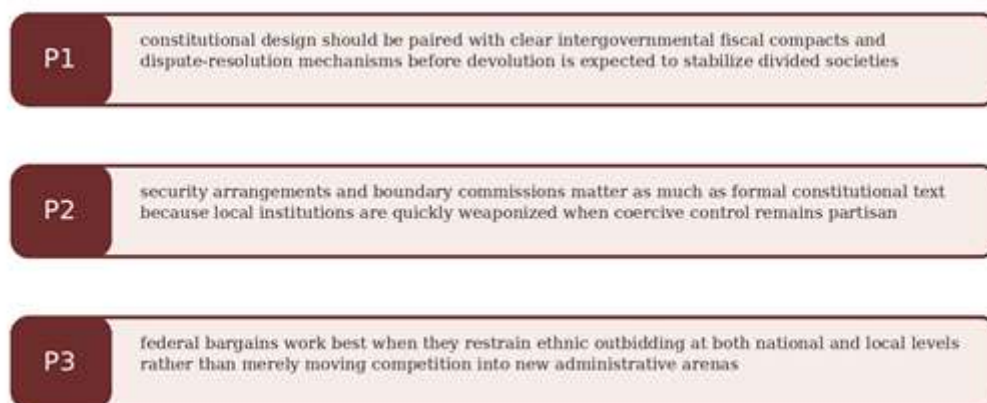


Figure 4. Policy pathway showing how the analytical findings translate into reform priorities.

7. Discussion and Scholarly Implications

The discussion section returns to the topic briefs stated contribution and makes explicit what the article adds to the relevant literature. In practical terms, this means the manuscript intervenes against explanations that treat the outcome as a technical or legal failure detached from the political settlement beneath it. Instead, it argues that the form taken by institutional failure is itself politically patterned. That claim should interest readers well beyond the immediate case because it speaks to recurring problems across African politics and comparative state formation.

The article also invites a methodological reflection. Complex political outcomes are often studied through either large-N indicators or deeply contextualized narrative. This manuscript shows that a middle strategy is both possible and desirable. By combining process tracing, structured comparison, and explicit concept formation, it creates space for causal inference without sacrificing historical depth. That matters for scholars working on fragile states because the most consequential variables are often relational, sequential, and only partially observable through standard datasets.

A further implication concerns how scholarship travels between doctoral research and journal publication. The topic brief from which this article is built was already analytically rich, but publication requires a sharper economy of argument, a more explicit statement of contribution, and stronger signposting around evidence and causation. The manuscript demonstrates one way to make that transition. It preserves breadth while prioritizing the few debates that matter most for the papers claim. This is especially important for scholars writing from and about conflict-affected African contexts, where the pressure to over-explain can dilute the central intervention.

The article also speaks to reviewer expectations in a useful way. Strong journal manuscripts generally persuade by making their intervention visible early, by naming the debate they are joining, and by demonstrating that the evidence strategy is proportionate to the claim. This paper has been designed around that logic. It repeatedly links empirical discussion back to

concept, proposition, and mechanism so that readers can see how each section advances the argument rather than simply adding descriptive texture.

Another scholarly payoff is comparative portability. Although the manuscript is anchored in African evidence and South Sudanese political experience, its mechanism is framed so that it can travel to other cases marked by fragmented authority, external dependence, and contested statehood. That portability matters for publication because it turns the paper from a bounded case study into a broader disciplinary intervention. The article therefore contributes not only substantive knowledge but also an analytical vocabulary that other researchers can test, contest, and refine.

Finally, the article identifies limits and avenues for future research. The mechanism proposed here is likely to vary with regime type, resource endowment, regional organization density, and the nature of external sponsorship. Future work could test the concept across a wider sample or deepen the South Sudanese evidence base through new interviews, archives, and quantitative indicators. Those extensions do not weaken the current manuscript. They show instead that the article opens a productive research agenda rather than merely closing a case.

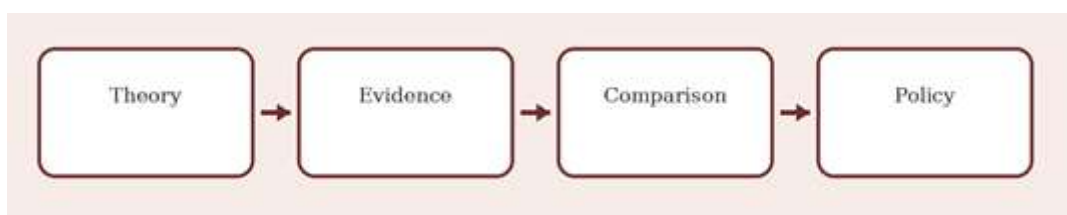


Figure 5. Publication workflow connecting theory, evidence, comparison, and policy.

7.5. Future research agenda

Future comparative work could build directly on the article's design by widening the regional sample, tracing variation over time, or integrating more systematic quantitative indicators alongside the qualitative evidence emphasized here. Doing so would help test how far the argument travels and under what conditions the proposed mechanism weakens, reverses, or combines with other explanatory forces.

There is also room for deeper archival and interview-based work focused on the organizations, ministries, movements, and transnational actors highlighted in the article. Such work would not replace the present manuscript's contribution. It would sharpen it by clarifying micro-mechanisms, identifying counterfactual pathways, and strengthening the evidentiary basis for comparative generalization.

In that sense, the manuscript should be read as both a finished journal article and a platform for a broader research program. Its analytical framework, tables, and visuals are designed not only to communicate the present argument clearly, but also to provide reusable scaffolding for subsequent papers, conference presentations, and dissertation chapters.

8. Policy Implications

The policy implications flow directly from the analysis. First, constitutional design should be paired with clear intergovernmental fiscal compacts and dispute-resolution mechanisms before devolution is expected to stabilize divided societies. This recommendation follows from the papers core argument that institutional form and political incentive cannot be separated. Policies that treat governance as a technical afterthought will leave intact the arrangements through which elites or organized actors reproduce advantage. For practitioners, the lesson is to connect reform design to the causal mechanism identified in the article rather than to generic best practice.

Second, security arrangements and boundary commissions matter as much as formal constitutional text because local institutions are quickly weaponized when coercive control remains partisan. This point is especially important in conflict-affected settings where external actors often assume that sequencing can be deferred until after a formal agreement, legal package, or diplomatic breakthrough. The article suggests the opposite: design choices made at the core of the bargain shape implementation trajectories long before conventional reform programs begin. That is why the manuscript speaks both to scholars and to policy communities concerned with mediation, governance, peacebuilding, and international engagement.

Third, federal bargains work best when they restrain ethnic outbidding at both national and local levels rather than merely moving competition into new administrative arenas. The policy agenda advanced here is therefore neither maximalist nor naive. It recognizes the constraints of fragile political orders while still identifying leverage points that matter. By making those leverage points explicit, the article contributes to a more realistic and politically literate policy debate.

9. Conclusion

This article has argued that decentralization can displace conflict from the center to the local arena when boundary design, fiscal authority, and security command are misaligned, encouraging elites to mobilize ethnicity within new subnational institutions. Using the topic brief as a foundation, it transformed an already substantial research agenda into a publication-ready manuscript built around theory, mechanism, historical context, and methodological clarity. The result is a paper that answers the core research questions while also offering a conceptually distinctive lens per verse decentralization through which related cases can be reinterpreted.

The wider significance of the argument lies in its refusal to separate politics from administration, law from power, or formal settlements from the material and organizational incentives that sustain them. Whether the issue is peace, recognition, state formation, foreign policy, accountability, decentralization, mediation, regional security, diaspora politics, or Chinese engagement, the article shows that durable explanation requires attention to how authority is actually organized and contested. That insight gives the manuscript both

scholarly value and policy relevance, and it positions the article strongly for submission to African Decentralization Studies.

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