



Research Article

Power-Sharing as a Conflict-Resolution Strategy: An Assessment of Its Successes and Failures in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT



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Armed conflicts remain widespread globally, particularly in Africa, where rival factions compete for power, resources, and recognition. Power-sharing is often presented as a practical means of mitigating such violence by granting competing groups access to political power and resources. In South Sudan, the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan illustrates both the promise and the limitations of this approach. This paper argues that power-sharing produced short-term elite accommodation and reduced the risk of full-scale conflict among the major factions, but failed to build durable institutions, promote accountability, or foster inclusive state-building. Although maintaining a power-sharing government requires political leaders to set aside their differences, such arrangements do not necessarily address the deeper causes of conflict. This paper examines how power-sharing can serve as a peacebuilding and conflict-resolution strategy to address elite and intercommunal conflict and bridge deep divisions in war-affected societies. Using qualitative analysis, the study conducts a thematic analysis of existing literature on the conflict in South Sudan and on post-war power-sharing arrangements elsewhere in Africa. It shows that arrangements centred primarily on elite bargaining can temporarily stabilise conflict while leaving its structural drivers intact.

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Introduction

The Republic of South Sudan is a nascent state affected by armed conflict. The civil war erupted in December 2013, when political disputes between President Salva Kiir and his former vice president, Riek Machar, escalated into open warfare. Although the violence began in Juba, it soon spread across much of the country, causing extensive loss of life, destroying property, and displacing millions within South Sudan and into neighbouring states. Despite its political origins, the war was widely interpreted as an ethnic conflict between the Dinka and Nuer, even as additional armed groups emerged and political allegiances shifted. At its core, however, the conflict stemmed from elite power struggles within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, which intensified the rivalry and sustained a cycle of factional violence.

Like many other armed conflicts around the world, South Sudan's civil war can be understood through the lens of structural violence. Peace and conflict scholars argue that unresolved grievances over justice, human needs, security, and identity can become major drivers of violence (Burton, 1990; Galtung, 1996; John, 1995). In South Sudan, structural violence is evident in widespread power imbalances, impunity, the use of force to maintain political control, marginalisation, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. These inequalities have become embedded in the country's sociopolitical and economic institutions. This perspective highlights the complex, multi-actor struggle for power and the difficulty of containing it within a

formal peace process involving SPLM factions. This paper argues that power-sharing in South Sudan did not extend beyond the distribution of power among armed groups and therefore failed to create the conditions necessary for durable peace.

It further argues that the 2018 settlement achieved only limited stabilisation because its elite-centred design left the structural drivers of the conflict largely intact. South Sudan's conflict is rooted in ethnopolitical struggles over power and resources. Some scholars link the war to efforts by Dinka elites to consolidate political dominance (Idowu et al., 2019). Laudati argues that this dominance has been justified through a victimhood narrative that obscures claims of ethnic supremacy and legitimises greater Dinka control over non-Dinka. In this context, power-sharing functions both as a tool of conflict management and as an indicator of state-building capacity in a fragile post-war state. International organisations therefore promote power-sharing as a peacebuilding and conflict-resolution mechanism to manage elite and communal conflicts and to bridge deep social divisions in war-affected societies.

Power-sharing can sometimes deepen existing divisions, weaken national unity, and hinder peace efforts. The article develops these points through four steps. First, it details the methodology and theoretical framework for analysing power-sharing, mainly based on Lijphart's consociational model. Second, it discusses the political and institutional conditions that made South Sudan vulnerable to renewed conflict after independence.

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Third, it assesses the limited achievements of the 2015 peace agreement and the R-ARCSS, especially their impact on reducing elite confrontation and promoting inclusion. Lastly, it examines implementation failures—such as security-sector fragmentation, executive dominance, ethnic mobilisation, corruption, weak oversight, and shrinking trust among key actors—that have fueled conflict and fears of South Sudan returning to war.

Methodology

Qualitative research, by contrast, employs systematic investigative methods to study phenomena in their natural environments and interpret them based on the meanings people assign to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It may entail describing a phenomenon, context, issue, or event; collecting data through observation, interviews, visual techniques, and other means; and analysing variables measured on nominal or ordinal scales (Kumar, 1999). Additionally, qualitative research allows researchers to generate theoretical insights from the collected data (Hoy et al., 2009). This study uses a qualitative exploratory approach to investigate how power-sharing functions as a mechanism for conflict resolution and managing political disputes after conflict. It relies on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarly work, research reports, and policy review materials, which are analysed thematically around two main issues: the dynamics of South Sudan's conflict and the governance challenges that followed the peace agreements.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This section explains power-sharing, reviews major critiques of elite-centred settlements, and explores these debates in the context of South Sudan's fragile state-building process. Institutions determine whether social conflicts lead to political cooperation or armed conflict. South Sudan's independence was marked by weak post-liberation institutions that failed to prevent war, safeguard minorities, limit executive authority, or resolve elite disputes. Instead, adversarial politics from the liberation movement persisted after secession, fuelling ethnopolitical mobilisation, violence, and insurgency. The mix of coercive practices, fragile institutions, and social and political divisions weakens peace, security, and state legitimacy, resulting in unstable political systems that are hard to reform (Kaplan & Rieff, 1994).

Countries with these issues often develop unpredictable political orders based on bargaining rather than broad sociocultural or political consensus (E., 1996). This institutional fragility raises the question of whether power-sharing can effectively reduce conflict or merely shift access within a fragile state. Power-sharing is generally defined as a political system that prevents any one organisation, leader, or group from monopolising state power (Cheeseman & Tendi, 2010). In divided societies, power-sharing is often used to involve rival factions in joint decision-making, share authority, and reduce the likelihood of violence.

If violent conflict is understood as a bargaining strategy, post-war interventions remain inadequate when they fail to alter armed groups' strategic incentives. In South Sudan, kleptocratic networks and patronage systems have prioritised the extraction of state resources over collective security since the country's early years. Lijphart's consociational model provides the principal theoretical benchmark, linking stability to elite cooperation, proportional representation, minority protection, and agreed limits on unilateral power (Lijphart, 1980). These principles are particularly relevant because the R-ARCSS sought to stabilise South Sudan by incorporating rival political and armed actors into a shared institutional framework. Accordingly, this analysis uses power-sharing theory as an evaluative framework rather than assuming power-sharing will succeed.

The main question is whether the settlement expanded participation beyond armed groups, enhanced accountability, and shifted politics from personalised bargaining toward rule-based governance. These criteria help evaluate South Sudan, taking into account both the potential and the limitations of consociational conflict management. While power-sharing is appealing because it implies that inclusive institutions can turn armed conflict into negotiated politics, this idea remains debated. Critics warn that consociational systems might entrench ethnic divisions, strengthen elites, and reinforce authoritarian bargaining, undermining democratic accountability (Lustick, 1997; Horowitz, 2014). Therefore, in South Sudan, theory should be applied carefully. The concern is not just whether formal power-sharing existed, but whether it led to enforceable commitments that changed elite behaviour, limited coercive power, and provided credible avenues for broader political participation.

Power-Sharing Models and Their Limits

Power-sharing debates often contrast integrative and disintegrative approaches. Integrative approaches assume that identity-based divisions can be mitigated through inclusive institutions, civic loyalty, and democratic participation. Disintegrative approaches, by contrast, regard these divisions as more deeply entrenched and may therefore favour autonomy, separation, or other arrangements that reduce direct competition among groups. This distinction is important in South Sudan, where political violence has been driven not only by identity divisions but also by the instrumentalisation of identity in elite struggles over power and resources. It also helps explain why redistributive strategies often produce only temporary peace.

In South Sudan, the central weakness of power-sharing agreements is their reliance on a grand-coalition model (McGarry & O'Leary, 2004). Such coalitions can be viable, but only when supported by consent among competing actors and sustained cooperation, rather than parallel political structures. Although the transfer of power and resources may temporarily halt conflict, it rarely transforms the underlying relationships or incentives that sustain it. When one side's gains are perceived as another side's losses, long-term acceptance of distributive arrangements becomes unlikely.

Elite Bargaining and Power-Sharing Failure

Elite-centred power-sharing places political leaders at the heart of efforts to stabilise divided societies. Its core premise is that the principal representatives of competing groups should be brought into a shared political process and encouraged to cooperate. For Lijphart, democratic stability in deeply divided societies depends less on eliminating social cleavages than on elites' willingness to move beyond zero-sum competition and build consensus. When elites recognise the destructive consequences of intolerance and civil war, their commitment to compromise can reduce the destabilising effects of social division.

Under this model, elite cooperation is expected to reassure rival groups, protect their interests, and create a political environment in which laws and institutions reflect shared concerns. Lijphart therefore places greater emphasis on elites' collective commitment to preserving stability than on any single institutional arrangement. He illustrates this with the cases of Colombia and the Netherlands, where democratic mechanisms, including elections, were temporarily adjusted or suspended to preserve elite consensus. Because power-sharing depends so heavily on elite cooperation, its success also hinges on leaders' willingness to prevent conflict from escalating.

However, this willingness cannot be taken for granted. As Thomas Sisk argues, the expectation that post-war leaders will

become more moderate, accept power-sharing with former enemies, or be replaced by more conciliatory figures is difficult to sustain in the absence of empirical support (Fukuyama & Sisk, 1996; Sisk, 2022). This constitutes a major weakness in Lijphart's account. Although he emphasises the importance of elite cooperation, studies of internal conflict in South Sudan and elsewhere in Africa show that elites often exploit and manipulate social and identity divisions for political gain (1936-, 1991; Gagnon, 2013). This concern has led scholars to question the central role elites play in power-sharing models.

Cammett and Malesky argue that reliance on elite collaboration often overlooks the realities of post-conflict politics, where competition over scarce state resources is frequently politicised along ethnic lines. Although distributing authority among group representatives is intended to encourage consensus and stability, it can instead produce legal deadlock, disputes over national resources, rigid bargaining positions, and veto politics (McCulloch, 2024). Cheeseman and Tendi similarly note that elites can manipulate arrangements designed to promote cooperation to protect their interests and expand their political dominance. The broader problem is that elite accommodation can displace democratic accountability. In such circumstances, the actors expected to sustain peace may become its principal obstacles. Power-sharing may reduce open conflict in the short term, but when it rewards bargaining power rather than institutional responsibility, it can entrench exclusion, preserve patronage, and weaken the democratic foundations necessary for durable peace.

Comparative Caution: Secession and State Building

For South Sudan, this comparison is significant because the central challenge is not simply how to divide political power and economic resources among competing armed factions. It is also a question of whether power-sharing can help build a state that commands loyalty beyond factional and ethnic constituencies. Including rivals in government may reduce immediate violence, but it can also preserve the elite incentives that produced the conflict in the first place. This tension frames the South Sudanese case. The analysis now turns to South Sudan to examine how elite rivalry, ethnic mobilisation, institutional weakness, and negotiated settlements interacted to produce temporary stabilisation but repeated political failure.

South Sudanese Conflict and Governance

South Sudan gained independence on 9 July 2011 after a referendum on 9 January 2011 (Wolfram, 2012). The new nation included over sixty ethno-linguistic groups, with the Dinka and Nuer being the largest (Jok, 2011). However, within three years, the country plunged back into civil war. This conflict stemmed from structural issues, mainly elite struggles for power among ethno-political groups and the government's failure to deliver essential public services (Blanchard, 2013; Mehari, 2013). The crisis also had an ethnic component rooted in historical divisions, especially the 1990s SPLM/A split between factions loyal to John Garang and Riek Machar. The reconciliation of key factions in the early 2000s helped end the power struggle that previously fueled ethnic violence on all sides.

However, renewed divisions within the SPLM/A in 2013 triggered a political crisis. Kiir's dismissal of the entire cabinet and several elected state governors was widely seen as arbitrary and, in some respects, unconstitutional (Awolich, 2014). Widespread corruption further deepened instability by exposing weaknesses in the state's legislative, regulatory, and enforcement institutions (Mehari, 2013). Unequal distribution of political power and resources also contributed to the conflict's structural causes (Jok, 2011, 2013). Key political offices, largely dominated by Dinka

elites, were often used to divert public resources into private networks (Jok, 2013; Wolfram, 2012). Resources needed to build the bureaucracy and deliver public services were instead absorbed into patronage structures (Wolfram, 2012). As a result, the government struggled to provide adequate services. In this regard, Jok (2011, p. 2) wrote that "... corruption, nepotism, exclusion, and domination of government and business by some ethnic groups all seemed to erode the public's enthusiasm for the upcoming transition."

The state-building project launched after the 2005 CPA faltered because the government failed to address several related challenges: (a) building effective institutions and transforming the SPLM/A from a guerrilla movement into a ruling party and a professional army; (b) responding to reform demands within the SPLM (Jok, 2014); (c) disarming militias from different regions and integrating them into communities; (d) replacing the Transitional Constitution with a Permanent Constitution by 2015 (Villiers, 2013); (e) holding accountable those responsible for past ethnically motivated killings and compensating affected citizens; (f) improving Dinka-Nuer relations after a long history of rivalry and hostility; and (g) ensuring that young people benefited from independence (Awolich, 2014; Jok, 2014).

These unresolved weaknesses left the state divided, unable to deliver services, exercise effective political authority, or maintain control over its territory. Booth (2014, p. 3) summarises the underlying causes of the South Sudan conflict as follows: The roots of this crisis run deep. The government attempted to contain inter-communal violence without fully committing to the hard work of addressing its causes, which include trauma from decades of war, economic disparity, historical grievances between communities, human rights abuses, and political grievances arising from real or perceived underrepresentation. On top of this, the government progressively reduced the space for political competition, both within and outside the ruling party, and for independent media and civil society voices to be heard.

Rivalry among senior political elites along ethnic lines, their violent handling of political disputes, and limited development—driven in part by rampant corruption and ethno-political clientelism—created conditions for conflict to intensify. Hence, the outbreak of war in 2013 was not unexpected to many observers. Johnson (2014) argues that unresolved tensions within the SPLM continued to shape the party's internal politics. Although the conflict was often framed as an SPLM war, this framing also reflected the nationalisation of divisions within the ruling party. Similarly, Rolandsen (2015) identifies the SPLM's internal fractures as a central cause of the crisis, arguing that deep cleavages within the ruling party helped propel the country into catastrophic violence.

As tensions rose, an alleged coup attempt and prior political sabotage linked to Riek Machar escalated into a war that later took on an ethnic dimension, triggering ethnic killings and retaliatory attacks across the country as the violence quickly spread beyond Juba, the South Sudanese government's capital (Blanchard, 2014). Reports of attacks on civilians perceived to support Machar, particularly Nuer civilians, were followed by mutinies in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity, where Dinka civilians were also killed. As the war spread, President Kiir and Machar mobilised armed civilian youth, turning a political struggle into a broader ethnic mobilisation campaign (Waal, 2014). This recruitment pattern helps explain why political allegiance increasingly aligned with ethnic lines, even though ethnicity alone was not the sole determinant of participation in the conflict. Most analysts of South Sudan's war, and indeed of similar situations across Africa, are preoccupied with explaining why, for instance, tensions

between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda erupted into full-blown genocide.

While this line of enquiry is legitimate, it does not explain why war erupts along one ethnic division rather than another. The current violent struggle in South Sudan may appear superficially ethnic in terms of recruitment and participation, but it aligns more with de Waal's broader critique of the SPLM's political culture. He argues that institution-building was never central to the movement's immediate agenda; the overriding objective was to remove the regime in Khartoum. This liberation-focused orientation helps explain why South Sudan's post-independence elites struggled to transform military authority into accountable governance. As de Waal (2014) concludes, "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that South Sudan's now-ruling elites were more interested in power than in doing the hard work of nation-building." Hence, the power struggle in South Sudan is a product of its political environment.

What emerged after Sudan's secession reflects Jean-François Bayart's portrayal of African states as deeply rooted in the past and in the savagery of contemporary political practices (Bayart, 2009). Bayart highlights the persistence of deeply rooted patterns of statecraft and the influence of despotic formal institutions on political and economic outcomes (Bayart, 2009). While many analyses of African politics focus on elite corruption, Bayart places it within the state's role in enabling political dysfunction. He describes this process as the criminalisation of the state: a condition in which state-supported criminal practices become normalised, including violent competition for power, militant efforts to retain power, institutionalised fraud, and the plundering of public resources (Bayart, 2009).

Bayart's main argument is that aspects of statehood are corrupt. All other elements are seen as signs of disruption and failure. As the state failed, power and resources were contested, and the conflict shifted from mere elite contestation to ethnic mobilisation. These developments show that the war was rooted in more than a political dispute; it was shaped by a violent quest for power and fear of losing it. As the pursuit of power and the ambition to retain it became the paramount cause of war, ethnic politicisation became both a strategy and a tool for waging political war. Gabrielle Lynch's work on ethnic mobilisation shows that anticipated political gains are essential to "the construction and mobilisation of ethnic identity" and that fear of loss often plays a more decisive role in shaping elites' behaviour (Lynch, 2011). For Lynch, elites are motivated by both fear of political marginalisation and the opportunity to gain recognition within a wider ethnic bloc.

In South Sudan, violent elite bargaining revealed a deeper pattern of state privatisation: rulers appropriated state functions and resources, leaving what William Reno describes as a shadow state. The result was not only a hollowed-out state but also a political order in which the use of force became increasingly decentralised. As a result, President Kiir's efforts to consolidate authority through patronage networks suggest that the SPLM was no longer "the central locus of state power"; instead, it became one of several instruments through which he governed, with regime strength resting largely on patronage. In this respect, South Sudan reflected not only what Mamdani calls "decentralised despotism" but also the violent bifurcation of power inherited from the SPLM's liberation politics. This legacy was preserved and transplanted into South Sudan's post-liberation governance, thereby reproducing some of its violent tendencies and giving rise to another form of elite despotism (Mamdani, 1996).

In this context, elite manipulation of ethnic divisions reignited violence and complicated subsequent peacemaking efforts as the war spread across South Sudan. A clear in-group/out-group

distinction, such as that between the SPLM-In-Government and the SPLM-In-Opposition, defines a political community. Nevertheless, this boundary does more than separate one group from another: it also determines who counts as an ally of the government or an armed group, and who is eligible for recruitment. Rather than reflecting supposed "ancient hatreds," South Sudan's conflicts have been deliberately orchestrated from above. Ambitious, exclusionary leaders have mobilised ethnic identities to commit violence and seize power, wealth, and privilege, while embattled elites—those excluded from power—have used similar strategies to renegotiate their inclusion. This suggests that elites "play the ethnic card" by mobilising supporters along ethnic lines, manipulating grievances, fears, and animosities, and directing ethnic militias to advance their political agendas.

Through these arrangements, rulers secured loyalty and contained political opposition by integrating elites into state institutions and distributing resources through patrimonial networks, while managing the competing demands of ethnic groups (Abrahamsen, 2001). Yet this patronage system is largely unsustainable, especially in South Sudan, where the economy is struggling and international funding has dwindled since the 2013 war. As resources declined and patronage networks contracted, more elites were pushed out of power, intensifying competition for dominance and access to scarce resources. These conditions gave elites greater incentives to mobilise supporters, either to preserve their control of the state or to challenge the existing order. Braathen et al. (2000, p. 14) apply variants of this argument to conflicts in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and their contributions are persuasive. In their introduction, they summarise the central argument as follows:

The structuring of state violence is, above all, a reflection of the wish to keep power and thereby the possibilities for accumulation. These contests in the arena of the state can thus provoke violent confrontation between groups with different local and/or community affiliations. In particular, these situations tend to arise when the neopatrimonial state is forced to retreat due to resource constraints.

This argument is useful for the South Sudanese case because it links the contraction of patronage resources to the escalation of ethnic mobilisation. As access to state resources narrowed, elite competition increasingly shifted to ethnic networks, turning struggles over power and accumulation into broader group confrontation.

Ethnic Manipulation

Many analyses of ethno-political conflict in South Sudan emphasise the pursuit of power and resources, identifying elite marginalisation and exclusion as the conditions that transformed elite rivalry into ethnic mobilisation on the ground. South Sudanese leaders have repeatedly used ethnic identity to mobilise support and justify violence. At the outset of the conflict, divisions within the presidential guard escalated along Dinka–Nuer lines. The African Union Commission of Inquiry reported that Nuer civilians were subsequently killed in Juba by forces aligned with President Kiir, while forces loyal to Riek Machar attacked Dinka civilians outside Juba. These events demonstrate that ethnic identity did not independently cause the war; rather, leaders, security actors, and armed groups politicised it in pursuit of strategic advantage. Ethnic diversity became politically dangerous because state institutions were too weak to manage fears about representation and security. Nuer defections to Machar therefore reflected not only ethnic loyalty but also a perceived threat from forces aligned with Kiir.

In this context, identity facilitated mobilisation, while institutional weakness increased the likelihood of defection and the formation of armed alliances. The literature on ethnic fractionalisation helps explain this risk, but it is insufficient on its own. Ethnic diversity does not automatically produce war. Conflict becomes more likely when leaders politicise identity, institutions fail to manage political competition, and communities believe rival groups control state power. South Sudan illustrates the interplay of elite strategy, institutional weakness, and ethnic insecurity. The war thus reflected a political split within the ruling elite, mobilised along ethnic lines. Patronage and control over public resources deepened these divisions by rewarding loyal groups and intensifying fears among excluded communities. As Nuer civilians were targeted in Juba and Dinka civilians were attacked elsewhere, ethnic grievances became both a consequence and an instrument of elite competition.

Political Entrepreneurship

The 2013 conflict followed a similar pattern, with violence again framed largely around Dinka and Nuer identities. This recurrence suggests that post-independence institutions in South Sudan have failed to promote ethnic harmony, tolerance, and an inclusive national identity. The political conduct of Kiir and Machar reflects an intransigent form of political entrepreneurship. By sustaining a status quo that permits renewed conflict, both leaders have contributed to recurring violence and the loss of civilian lives.

Blagojevic captures this danger by arguing that instability, uncertainty, and weak institutions create conditions in which political entrepreneurs can manipulate ethnic emotions to mobilise groups for their own political ends. Similarly, Kaufman describes such politicians as belligerent leaders who preserve their power by exploiting political differences, intensifying ethnic hatred, and invoking historical memories of injustice to justify their actions. In this context, Kiir and Machar have manipulated ethnic loyalties both before and during South Sudan's conflict to advance their political ambitions. Their actions also reflect a longer historical pattern in which successive regimes, dating back to colonial Sudan, laid the foundations for ethnic division in South Sudan. The consequences of this manipulation include entrenched ethnic mistrust, weakened national institutions, repeated armed conflict, and a diminished capacity to build national cohesion. Ultimately, the unprincipled use of ethnic identity for political gain has obstructed South Sudan's efforts to foster unity, tolerance, and a shared national future.

The Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, 2015–2018

Given the politics of violence in South Sudan, the peace agreements must be read against this background. They sought to formalise cooperation among leaders whose strategies fused personal rivalry, military loyalty, and ethnic mobilisation. The August 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan, mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, aimed to resolve the political conflict between President Kiir and Riek Machar. During the negotiations, both leaders repeatedly violated earlier power-sharing agreements. Under pressure from the United Nations Security Council and U.S. sanctions, including an arms embargo, both sides signed a peace agreement that briefly reduced hostilities.

The agreement created 30 ministerial positions, allocated among Kiir, Machar, and other opposition groups. Kiir retained a larger share of cabinet and parliamentary seats, while Machar controlled more opposition seats in the cabinet (Okiech, 2016). Although the agreement addressed the principal parties' concerns, it lacked a credible mechanism to prevent armed groups from defecting or returning to war. Renewed conflict in July 2016

between government forces and Machar's loyalists forced Machar to flee the country and exposed the agreement's fragility. A major point of contention was the proposal to divide the country's 10 states into 28. The opposition argued that the new boundaries would give President Kiir's Dinka constituency a dominant parliamentary majority and alter the country's ethnic balance (Sperber, 2016).

These disputes contributed to the breakdown of the Transitional Government of National Unity. The August 2015 peace agreement, revitalised in September 2018 as the R-ARCSS, primarily targeted reforms to sociopolitical institutions rather than establishing durable political structures or effective peacebuilding mechanisms. The R-ARCSS provided a framework for a new transitional government and emphasised inclusive ministerial appointments. It designated four vice presidents and appointed Riek Machar as the first vice president, responsible for the governance sector. Apart from the first vice president, the other vice presidents were not ranked hierarchically. The R-ARCSS detailed the formation of the Transitional National Legislature, the Transitional National Legislative Assembly, and the Council of States, as well as the functioning of the Council of Ministers and the appointment of deputy ministers from various parties (Wuol, 2019).

However, the agreement still lacked mechanisms for strengthening state institutions during the transition. Because the negotiations took place amid an ongoing civil war, not all parties to the conflict were included, leaving room for spoilers. On 22 February 2020, Riek Machar and other opposition leaders were inaugurated as vice presidents in the new unity government. The R-ARCSS granted amnesty to rebels involved in the civil war, including Machar, while Kiir reaffirmed the original 10 states as an important concession. Conversely, major issues—particularly the integration of forces loyal to Kiir and Machar into a single national army—were deferred for later implementation (ICG, 2019). Implementation has since remained difficult. The compromises have favoured influential political elites, while armed groups have exploited a violent and extractive state system. Since then, the R-ARCSS has stagnated and remains at risk of collapse.

A lack of political will, delayed democratic reform, and unfinished security-sector integration have hindered sustainable political progress (Madut, 2022). Nearly a decade after the 2015 peace agreement, a permanent constitution remains incomplete, and elections initially scheduled for 2023 have been postponed to December 2026, with no assurance they will succeed. A second, more symbolic and constitutional, success was the normalisation of the principle that no single faction could legitimately monopolise the post-war state. By embedding inclusivity, proportional representation, and negotiated executive authority in the Transitional Settlement, the R-ARCSS expanded the formal political space for opposition parties, civil society, women, youth, churches, and local stakeholders.

Although these gains remain fragile, they have set a benchmark against which exclusionary rules and unilateral decision-making can be criticised. Despite these limited gains, power-sharing failed to produce a durable peace. Its shortcomings stem from three interconnected problems: elite capture of the settlement, weak institutional enforcement, and the persistence of ethnic and military mobilisation. Together, these factors explain why formal inclusion did not lead to accountability, security integration, or responsive governance. The first problem was elite capture. Political authority in South Sudan remains highly personalised, and real power "resides not with the legislature but with the president" (Cheeseman, 2015). Consequently, power-

sharing arrangements are unlikely to constrain executive dominance unless supported by enforceable institutional checks.

A more pessimistic interpretation holds that such bargains function as a covert means of distributing state resources, effectively creating a “tacit agreement on corruption” (Billon, 2008). In this context, power-sharing may reward armed leverage rather than public accountability. The second problem was weak enforcement. Post-war transitions often increase both the incentives and the opportunities for corruption, particularly when international actors prioritise stability over accountability (Hanlon, 2004). In South Sudan, incomplete security arrangements left military factions without clear provisions for demilitarisation, integration, or command responsibility. Without such mechanisms, institutional guarantees remained disconnected from the coercive realities shaping behaviour on the ground. The third problem was the persistence of parallel power centres.

Symbolic openings that initially appeared to signal progress became constrained by competition among elites, armed groups, and extra-parliamentary actors. Although external support can facilitate implementation, it can also reproduce patronage when it is not tied to institutional accountability. The following subsections examine these dynamics through the lenses of structural incentives, ethno-political cleavages, and the return to conflict.

Structural Incentives and Elite Bargaining

Power-sharing in South Sudan rewarded coercive leverage more than accountable governance. Rather than transforming political competition, successive settlements gave armed and political elites incentives to bargain over public offices, revenues, and control of the security sector. The state consequently became a prize to be divided rather than an institution to be strengthened.

Armed groups could threaten to withdraw, defect, or realign in order to improve their bargaining position, thereby reinforcing the cycle of violence. The R-ARCSS did little to change these incentives. Political organisation remained personalised, with parties and movements centred on individual leaders, patronage networks, and clientelistic relationships rather than programmatic platforms. Elite-driven power-sharing therefore entrenched patronage, rewarded loyalists, and preserved personal control, while leaving the gap between government and citizens largely unresolved.

Ethnic and Ethno-Political Cleavages

Ethno-political mobilisation can weaken governance. Although South Sudan is home to multiple ethnic groups, ethnic identity has not always determined political behaviour. In the current context, however, ethnic heterogeneity and localised disputes over land, livestock, and customary authority complicate national political bargains. Elite settlements that allocate offices among factions often fail to address these communal grievances. When communities perceive themselves as excluded from elite deals, localised violence can intensify, and national agreements can unravel. The R-ARCSS broadened formal political space by allowing wider representation and contributing to the emergence of new parties and armed groups.

Nevertheless, it also compartmentalised political interaction by reinforcing ethnic criteria in appointments and opposition formation (Sriram et al., 2009). These cleavages constrain participation within the formal structures of the R-ARCSS and are intensified by the gap between formal institutions and informal governance networks, including ethnic armies. By linking representation to specific parties and factions, the peace process further formalised identity-based claims. Political engagement

consequently continued through informal ethnic and patronage networks rather than through the agreement’s formal institutions. This arrangement shaped the incentives of political actors and communities to either remain committed to the peace process or defect from it. Marial Aduot captures this dynamic:

The onset of civil war must be explained through an analytical lens that explores what paved the way for inter-elite strife and the ethnic groups used as the political base for war. This approach narrows the cause of war to the crumbling of the loose coalition that held the SPLM together when the clique around President Kiir tightened its grip on the levers of power. As power became concentrated in the hands of a few, this circle grew more prone to violence to retain it. (Aduot, 2021, 199).

This argument shows how ethno-political elites converted liberation-era legitimacy into patronage and control. After the SPLM came to power, patron-client relations evolved into “nepotistic and clientelist networks” that preserved the status quo. The result was a political culture in which dependent groups were mobilised to defend elite power rather than to participate in accountable governance. Leaders shaped by armed struggle thus became inconsistent advocates of reform and defenders of factional privilege. This logic weakened democratic accountability and encouraged destabilising tactics that undermined development by personalising political power and access to resources. As Dawisha notes, such systems reduce “the motivation to leave power” to zero. In South Sudan, extractive institutions allowed elites to capture resources with “immunity and impunity” (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012). Prendergast similarly describes a violent kleptocracy in which predatory economic networks fuel conflict as elites renegotiate their shares of power and resources through violence.

Collapse of the Peace and Return to Conflict

Recent developments require careful qualification because the political and legal situation remains contested and continues to evolve. In 2026, renewed violence and insecurity following the 2025 Nasir clashes placed the R-ARCSS and the December 2026 election timetable at serious risk. The detention of Riek Machar and several senior officials further weakened the unity government. Although these developments do not, by themselves, demonstrate the R-ARCSS’s definitive collapse, they show that the settlement remains heavily dependent on elite cooperation, personal security guarantees, and the incomplete integration of the security sector. When disputes over leadership, force deployment, and election sequencing are managed through unilateral action rather than established institutions, power-sharing becomes vulnerable to renewed coercive bargaining.

The crisis therefore reinforces the paper’s central claim: South Sudan’s peace framework has been most effective as a mechanism for temporary elite accommodation and least effective as a foundation for institutional resilience. The humanitarian situation further demonstrates the costs of stalled implementation. In 2026, humanitarian agencies reported severe needs resulting from conflict, displacement, climate shocks, disease outbreaks, and economic stress, with particularly acute pressures in Jonglei and Upper Nile (OCHA, 2026). These conditions indicate that power-sharing has not yet produced the security, administrative capacity, or public trust necessary for peace to become meaningful at the community level.

Reform Requirements

The preceding failures indicate that power-sharing in South Sudan requires reform in four interconnected areas: security-sector integration, accountability, civil society inclusion, and transparent resource governance. To become more than mere elite

accommodation, power-sharing must rebuild trust among all stakeholders in the conflict. This includes establishing credible processes for the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration of rival armed groups, strengthening justice and accountability, expanding civil society participation, and ensuring more equitable management of natural resources. Trust remains central: without a stronger working relationship between Kiir and Machar, and without the inclusion of armed groups and local actors, power-sharing risks repeating the failures of the August 2015 peace agreement (Roach, 2016).

Security-sector reform should function as a peacebuilding tool by integrating armed groups into national forces, supporting disarmament, and helping ex-combatants transition to civilian life. These reforms should prioritise the reintegration of ex-combatants into the national army, police, and other security services while depoliticising the security sector. When properly implemented, DDR can strengthen peace by building trust between former enemies and reducing incentives for renewed mobilisation. The unity government should therefore combine national security-sector reform with community-based security measures. Judicial and accountability reforms are equally necessary to uphold the rule of law, rebuild trust in public institutions, and support democratic consolidation.

Transitional justice mechanisms, including truth and reconciliation processes, can assist victims by exposing past abuses, identifying their root causes, prosecuting those responsible, reforming institutions, and fostering reconciliation. In South Sudan, a transitional constitutional court and the ad hoc judicial reform committee envisaged in the R-ARCSS could help address social divisions, provided that they are implemented carefully and are not misused for retaliation. Inclusive peacebuilding must also extend beyond political elites. The transitional government should include representatives of grassroots communities and elite groups in peacebuilding processes, particularly through civil society organisations. Faith leaders, women, youth, and academics can contribute to participatory democratic governance and national reconciliation (Quinn, 2009). Finally, resource governance must be treated as a core peacebuilding issue.

Corruption and political power struggles are deeply intertwined, as kleptocratic networks exploit public resources for personal gain. Oil revenues should therefore be directed towards social, human, and institutional development through strong oversight, transparent revenue collection, and accountable expenditure. Although external mediators can support these reforms, durable democratic progress must begin within South Sudan and address local grievances, inter-ethnic tensions, and the equitable distribution of resources.

Conclusion

Power-sharing in South Sudan was only partially successful. Although it established formal mechanisms for inclusion, coalition government, and negotiated executive authority, it reduced full-scale conflict among major factions only at particular moments. It failed to transform elite accommodation into durable peace because it left militarised politics, weak institutions, executive dominance, ethnic mobilisation, corruption, and incomplete security-sector reform largely unresolved. South Sudan, therefore, demonstrates that power-sharing can suspend conflict without resolving its underlying causes when it distributes political authority while leaving coercive force, accountability, and state-building unaddressed.

The broader implication is that power-sharing should not be treated as a substitute for institution-building. In fragile post-war states, elite bargains must be supported by enforceable security arrangements, judicial reform, and meaningful participation

beyond the principal armed actors. Without these safeguards, power-sharing may entrench the same incentives that drove the conflict, including factional bargaining and the threat of renewed violence. For South Sudan, a viable peace settlement must therefore move beyond allocating positions among rival elites. Durable conflict resolution requires security integration, constitutional reform, decentralised accountability, credible elections, and mechanisms that connect national agreements to local reconciliation. Until these conditions are met, power-sharing will remain an interim mechanism for managing conflict rather than a foundation for sustainable peace.

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