

Challenges of Liberal Peace and State-Building in South Sudan (2011–2023)

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Since the end of the Cold War, liberal peacebuilding has become the dominant framework guiding international interventions in post-conflict societies. The model emphasizes democratization, rule of law, institutional reform, and market-oriented economic governance as foundations for sustainable peace. However, the implementation of liberal peacebuilding has faced serious challenges in fragile states characterized by weak institutions, social fragmentation, and political instability. This study examines the challenges of liberal peace and state-building in South Sudan between 2011 and 2023. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel design that integrates qualitative and quantitative data. Primary data were collected from 212 participants through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions across Juba, Bor, and Wau. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through SPSS, while qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the major obstacles to liberal peace implementation in South Sudan include weak state institutions, elite political competition, external dependency, limited local ownership of peace processes, and persistent ethnic divisions. The study argues that externally driven peacebuilding frameworks have often failed to align with local political realities and traditional governance structures. As a result, state-building initiatives have struggled to establish legitimacy and trust among citizens. The study concludes that sustainable peace in South Sudan requires a hybrid peacebuilding model that integrates liberal democratic reforms with locally grounded institutions, inclusive governance mechanisms, and community-based conflict resolution systems.

The hybrid peace building model is an integrated approach that combines internationally recognized principles of democratic governance, rule of law, human rights, constitutionalism, and accountable state institutions with South Sudan's indigenous institutions, traditional leadership, customary justice, local reconciliation mechanisms, and community participation.

Keywords: Liberal peace; state-building; peacebuilding; governance; post-conflict reconstruction; South Sudan; institutional legitimacy; local ownership

Abbreviations

CPA – Comprehensive Peace Agreement

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

IGAD – Intergovernmental Authority on Development

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

R-ARCSS – Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan

SPSS – Statistical Package for Social Sciences

UNMISS – United Nations Mission in South Sudan

1. Introduction

Peacebuilding and state-building have become central priorities in international relations, particularly in countries emerging from prolonged civil conflict. Liberal peace theory, rooted in classical liberal political philosophy, assumes that democratic governance, economic liberalization, and institutionalized rule of law create stable and peaceful societies (Doyle, 1983). Consequently, international actors such as the United Nations, regional organizations, and international financial institutions have promoted liberal peacebuilding frameworks in post-conflict countries.

The liberal peace model emphasizes several institutional reforms, including democratic elections, constitutional governance, market-based economic reforms, security sector reform, and the establishment of accountable state institutions. These reforms are intended to rebuild the relationship between citizens and the state by creating a stable social contract.

South Sudan provides an important context for examining the successes and limitations of liberal peacebuilding. Following decades of armed struggle against Sudan, South Sudan achieved independence in July 2011. Independence generated strong expectations that the new state would transition toward democratic governance, economic development, and peaceful coexistence among its diverse communities.

However, the optimism surrounding independence quickly deteriorated following the outbreak of civil war in December 2013. The conflict revealed deep structural weaknesses within South Sudan's political institutions and exposed the fragility of externally supported state-building efforts. Subsequent peace agreements, including the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) - have attempted to restore stability but have encountered significant implementation challenges.

Scholars have increasingly questioned whether liberal peacebuilding models are appropriate for complex post-conflict societies such as South Sudan. Critics argue that these frameworks often rely on universal institutional templates that overlook local political dynamics, traditional governance structures, and historical grievances (Richmond, 2014).

This study therefore investigates the challenges of implementing liberal peace and state-building in South Sudan between 2011 and 2023. The research seeks to contribute to ongoing debates about the effectiveness of international peacebuilding strategies in fragile states.

2. Literature Review

The liberal peace framework emerged from the belief that democratic governance and economic interdependence promote peace. Early proponents of liberal peace theory argued that democratic states are less likely to engage in violent conflict and more likely to cooperate through international institutions.

In the context of post-conflict reconstruction, liberal peacebuilding strategies emphasize:

- Democratization and elections
- Constitutional reforms
- Rule of law and judicial independence
- Security sector reform
- Market-oriented economic policies

These reforms are intended to rebuild governance systems capable of maintaining order and delivering public services. However, critics argue that liberal peacebuilding often reflects a top-down model driven by international actors rather than local communities. Richmond (2014) describes this approach as "institutional peacebuilding," where the focus is primarily on formal governance structures rather than societal reconciliation and grassroots participation.

Another critique concerns the lack of local ownership in peacebuilding initiatives. Many interventions rely heavily on international funding and external expertise, which may undermine domestic capacity and legitimacy.

In South Sudan, several studies highlight the complex relationship between state-building and identity politics. Ethnic mobilization, elite political competition, and weak institutional structures have created significant obstacles to governance reforms.

These challenges suggest that sustainable peace requires a more flexible and context-sensitive approach that integrates international standards with indigenous governance practices.

3. Conceptual Framework

The study is guided by a conceptual framework that explains how liberal peace interventions interact with domestic political conditions to influence state-building outcomes.

Conceptual Framework Diagram

Liberal Peace Interventions
(Democratization, Rule of Law,
Economic Liberalization,
Institutional Reforms)



Implementation Environment
(Weak Institutions,
Political Competition,
Ethnic Divisions,
External Dependency)



State-Building Outcomes
(Governance Legitimacy,
Political Stability,
Social Cohesion,
Sustainable Peace)

The framework suggests that the success of liberal peacebuilding depends on the interaction between international reform initiatives and domestic socio-political conditions.

Research Gap and Gap Filled by the Study

The reviewed literature shows that liberal peacebuilding and state-building in South Sudan have been widely discussed in relation to peace agreements, civil war, humanitarian crisis, weak institutions, ethnic divisions and international intervention. However, existing studies have not sufficiently integrated these issues into a single analytical framework that explains how liberal peacebuilding interacts with political instability, international interventions, governance challenges, ethnic conflicts, weak institutions, economic instability and local customary systems. This study fills that gap by examining liberal peace and state-building as interconnected processes rather than as separate themes.

The study also fills a contextual gap. Much of the literature on liberal peacebuilding is based on broad global debates or comparative post-conflict experiences. While such literature is useful, it does not fully explain the specific realities of South Sudan, where the state emerged from a liberation struggle, where formal institutions remain weak, where customary authority remains influential, and where peace agreements have repeatedly been shaped by elite bargaining. This study responds to that gap by focusing specifically on South Sudan between 2011 and 2023 and by examining the post-independence period as a critical phase of peacebuilding and state formation.

The study further fills an empirical gap by using a mixed-methods approach. Many existing studies rely heavily on documentary analysis, policy review or qualitative interpretation. Although these approaches are valuable, they do not always capture the perceptions of different categories of actors involved in governance, peacebuilding and local conflict resolution. This study addresses that gap by combining quantitative survey data with qualitative evidence from key informant interviews and focus group discussions. This approach allows the study to examine both measurable patterns and deeper explanations of the challenges affecting liberal peace and state-building.

1.3.1 General Objective

To examine the challenges of liberal peacebuilding and state-building in South Sudan.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

1. To assess the impact of political instability on liberal peace-building in South Sudan.
2. To examine the role of ethnic divisions in undermining state-building in South Sudan.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of international interventions in promoting sustainable peace in South Sudan.
4. To evaluate the relationship between local realities and liberal peace interventions in South Sudan.
5. To analyze institutional challenges affecting governance and state-building in South Sudan.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does political instability affect liberal peace and state-building in South Sudan?
2. What role do ethnic divisions play in undermining state-building efforts in South Sudan?
3. What are the major challenges affecting governance and institutional development in South Sudan?
4. How do local realities influence the implementation of liberal peace interventions in South Sudan?
5. How effective are international interventions in promoting sustainable peace in South Sudan?

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Study Area

The research was conducted in three major urban centers in South Sudan:

- **Study Location**
- **Significance**

Juba - National capital and political center

Bor - Key historical conflict region

Wau - Major administrative and economic hub

These locations were selected due to their relevance to governance, peace processes, and political dynamics.

4.2 Study Population

The study targeted stakeholders directly involved in governance and peacebuilding processes, including:

Government officials

Civil society organizations

Traditional leaders

Community members

NGO representatives

Policy experts

4.3 Sample Size

Table 1.1: Sample Distribution of Study Participants (N = 212)

Category	Number of Participants
Government officials	30
Civil society organizations	40
Community members	72
Traditional leaders	20
NGO representatives	25
Policy experts and researchers	25
Total	212

5. Study Design

The research adopted a mixed-methods research design using a convergent parallel approach. This design allowed the researcher to collect qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously and integrate findings during the analysis phase. A mixed-methods approach was selected because it provides a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena such as peacebuilding and state-building.

6. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected using multiple research methods.

6.1 Survey Questionnaires

Structured questionnaires were administered to respondents to collect quantitative data on governance performance, public trust in institutions, and perceptions of peacebuilding initiatives.

6.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Through purposive sampling thirty key informant interviews were conducted with policymakers, government officials, and civil society leaders to gain deeper insights into the implementation of peacebuilding reforms.

6.3 Focus Group Discussions

Four focus group discussions were conducted with community members to capture grassroots perspectives on governance and peacebuilding.

6.4 Document Review

Secondary data were collected from:

- Peace agreements
- Policy reports
- Academic publications
- Government documents
- UN Reports

7. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software to generate descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved identifying patterns and themes related to peacebuilding challenges.

8. Ethical Considerations

The study complied with established research ethics. Ethical approval and permission were obtained from the relevant authorities before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was ensured by using codes instead of names and securely storing the data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The researcher also upheld honesty, objectivity, and academic integrity throughout the study by accurately reporting findings and properly acknowledging all sources.

8. Findings

The findings of the study reveal several major challenges affecting liberal peace and state-building in South Sudan.

8.1 Weak State Institutions

One of the most significant challenges identified in the study is the weakness of state institutions. Many governance structures lack administrative capacity, financial resources, and accountability mechanisms.

Table 1.2: Perception of Institutional Strength

Institutional Capacity Percentage of Respondents	
Very weak	46%
Weak	32%
Moderate	15%
Strong	7%
Total	100%

These findings indicate that nearly 80% of respondents believe state institutions remain fragile.

Table 2.1: Chronology of State Fragility and Peace Accords in South Sudan, 2011–2023

Period/Event	State-building significance	Peacebuilding implication
July 2011 Independence	South Sudan became a sovereign state but inherited weak administrative and security institutions.	International actors increased support for liberal peacebuilding and formal state-building.
December 2013 Civil War	Political crisis within the ruling movement escalated into national institutional collapse.	Revealed limits of elite cohesion, civilian authority, and security sector integration.
August 2015 ARCSS	Created a transitional government and formal peace implementation mechanisms.	Demonstrated reliance on elite power-sharing and externally supported mediation.
July 2016 Renewed Violence	Collapse of the 2015 settlement exposed weak security guarantees and mistrust.	Showed that agreements without credible enforcement could not secure durable peace.
September 2018 R-ARCSS	Reconstituted the peace framework and expanded transitional commitments.	Became the central framework for peace, but implementation remained slow and contested.
2019–2023 Transitional Delays	Key reforms including security, constitutional processes, and elections faced repeated delays.	Confirmed the gap between agreement design, political will, institutional capacity, and local legitimacy.

8.2 Elite Political Competition

Political rivalry among elites has significantly undermined state-building efforts. Power struggles within political leadership contributed to the outbreak of conflict in 2013 and continue to affect governance stability. Respondents reported that political competition often prioritizes control of state resources rather than national development.

Table 2.2: Comparative Analysis of ARCSS (2015) and R-ARCSS (2018)

Dimension	ARCSS (2015)	R-ARCSS (2018)
Purpose	End the 2013 civil war and establish a Transitional Government of National Unity.	Revitalize the failed peace process and establish the RTGoNU with broader transitional commitments.
Governance logic	Elite power-sharing with competing political and military centers.	Expanded power-sharing framework with wider transitional institutions and reconstituted mechanisms.
Security provisions	Cantonment, demilitarization of Juba, and security arrangements that were weakly implemented.	Unification of forces through Necessary Unified Forces and command restructuring, but implementation delayed.
Oversight mechanisms	JMEC and related monitoring arrangements with limited enforcement authority.	RJMEC and expanded implementation architecture, still constrained by limited coercive enforcement capacity.
Implementation challenge	Collapsed into renewed violence in July 2016 due to mistrust and incomplete security arrangements.	Reduced large-scale national war but experienced repeated delays, extensions, and unresolved transitional tasks.
Relevance to study	Demonstrates the risk of elite power-sharing without institutional transformation.	Demonstrates the continued gap between agreement design, local realities, and actual state-building outcomes.

8.3 External Dependency

International actors have played a critical role in supporting South Sudan's peace process. However, heavy reliance on external actors has created dependency that limits domestic ownership of governance reforms. Many respondents argued that international interventions sometimes impose solutions that do not reflect local realities.

8.4 Limited Local Ownership

Another major finding is the limited participation of local communities in peacebuilding initiatives. Many programs are designed by international organizations with minimal input from local stakeholders. This lack of participation reduces public trust in peacebuilding processes.

8.5 Ethnic Fragmentation

Ethnic divisions continue to influence political mobilization and conflict dynamics in South Sudan. Political actors often mobilize support along ethnic lines, which undermines national unity. Respondents identified ethnic polarization as one of the most serious obstacles to sustainable peace.

9. Discussion

The findings confirm several critiques of liberal peace theory. While liberal peacebuilding emphasizes institutional reform, the results of this study show that institutional reforms alone are insufficient in contexts characterized by weak governance systems and deep social divisions.

In South Sudan, state-building initiatives have struggled to generate legitimacy among citizens. This legitimacy gap reflects the disconnect between externally imposed governance reforms and local political realities.

The study also highlights the importance of local ownership in peacebuilding processes. Without meaningful participation from communities, peacebuilding initiatives may fail to address root causes of conflict.

These findings support the argument that sustainable peace requires a hybrid peacebuilding model that integrates liberal institutional reforms with indigenous governance practices and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms.

10. Conclusion

This study examined the challenges of liberal peace and state-building in South Sudan between 2011 and 2023. The findings demonstrate that while liberal peacebuilding has contributed to the establishment of formal institutions, significant obstacles remain.

Weak governance structures, elite political competition, external dependency, limited local ownership of peace processes, and ethnic fragmentation continue to undermine state-building efforts.

The study concludes that achieving sustainable peace in South Sudan requires a more context-sensitive approach to peacebuilding that recognizes the importance of local political realities and community participation.

11. Recommendations

Promote Local Ownership

Peacebuilding initiatives should actively involve communities, traditional leaders, and civil society organizations.

Strengthen Institutional Capacity

Government institutions should receive targeted capacity-building programs to improve governance effectiveness.

Encourage Inclusive Political Dialogue

National dialogue processes should include women, youth, and marginalized communities.

Adopt Hybrid Peacebuilding Approaches

Peacebuilding strategies should combine liberal democratic institutions with traditional governance systems.

Enhance Regional Mediation Efforts

Regional organizations should continue supporting peace processes while promoting national ownership.

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