

## Research Article

# Political Variability and Security Dilemma: A Critical Analysis of Security Infrastructure in Post Conflict South Sudan (2011-2021)

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## Abstract

The study examined how political variability, security dilemma and associated organized violence impacted the lives of South Sudanese citizens. It's does this examination through the employment of mixed method research design, underpinned by a pragmatic philosophical stance, to measure and understand a deep and nuanced of the complex socio-political dynamics. The primary method of data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 55 key stakeholders drawn from five distinct categories: government officials 12 (21.8%), military and security leaders 10 (18.2%), political leaders 11 (20%), civil society and community leaders 12 (21.8%), and international actors 10 (18.2%). The secondary method of data collection involved distribution of 370 questionnaires. The study deployed purposive and stratified sampling strategy which ensured a comprehensive range of perspectives. The study found that political variability and the security dilemma were not separate phenomena but a single, self-reinforcing cycle with devastating consequences. The security dilemma manifested itself as a pervasive climate of mistrust that fueled pre-emptive militarization, undermined all peacebuilding processes like Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR), and created an environment where organized violence and predation by security actors became normalized. Besides, the study identified the agency of political and security leaders as the central variable; their personalized and unaccountable mode of rule was the primary mechanism perpetuating the crisis, yet they also possessed the unique capacity to initiate reform when subjected to sufficient internal and external pressures. The political variability and the security dilemma were found to be mutually constitutive, creating a vicious cycle that has hollowed out the state and broken the social contract. The study concludes that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through technical peacebuilding interventions alone, but requires a fundamental political transformation that alters the incentive structures for the elite, enforces accountability, and rebuilds state legitimacy from the ground up. The agency of leaders, for better or for worse, was identified as the ultimate determinant of the nation's trajectory. Based on the findings, the study recommended a holistic, multi-layered strategy encapsulated in the proposed "Framework for Mitigating Political Variability and Overcoming the Security Dilemma (MPV-OSD Framework)".

## 1. Introduction

The transition from a successful armed liberation movement to a stable, functioning state is one of the most perilous journeys in modern history. Globally, the historical record is littered with revolutionary victories that devolved into internal conflict, authoritarianism, and state failure. In Southeast Asia, after the unification of Vietnam in 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party engaged in systematic political purges and the re-education of former rivals, demonstrating how a wartime command structure can be repurposed for post-war political repression rather than inclusive nation-building. Similarly, in Algeria, the triumphant Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) fractured almost immediately after achieving independence from France in 1962. The ensuing power struggle, known as the "crisis of the summer of 1962," pitted political leaders like Ahmed Ben Bella against military commanders such as Houari Boumédiène, establishing a historical precedent for the military's deep and often destabilizing role in Algerian politics that persists to this day. This global pattern reveals a critical historical lesson: the very organizational discipline, ideological cohesion, and military capacity required to defeat a colonial or authoritarian regime often contain the seeds of post-liberation conflict, as internal factions vie for control of the new state apparatus [1].

On the African continent, this historical challenge has been particularly acute, shaped by the legacies of colonial statecraft and the nature of anti-colonial struggle. The period of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s saw numerous liberation movements successfully take power, only to replicate or intensify the authoritarian and extractive practices of their predecessors. In Angola, the departure of the Portuguese in 1975 triggered an immediate and devastating civil war between the three main liberation movements the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA. The conflict became a proxy for the Cold War, but its domestic roots lay in the deep ideological and ethno-regional divisions between leaders like Agostinho Neto (MPLA) and Jonas Savimbi (UNITA), whose competition for control over the state's vast oil and diamond wealth fueled a 27-year war. In Zimbabwe, the ZANU-PF, led by Robert Mugabe, utilized its victory in the liberation war (concluded by the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement) to systematically dismantle political opposition. This was most brutally exemplified by the Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland between 1983 and 1987, where the army's Fifth Brigade, loyal to Mugabe, was deployed to crush supporters of Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU party. This event cemented a historical pattern where the security sector functions as an instrument of party control, a core feature of the neopatrimonial "warlord politics" that has defined many post-liberation African states [2, 3].

The Horn of Africa, South Sudan's immediate geopolitical neighborhood, offers a particularly stark set of historical precedents. In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of rebel movements led by Meles Zenawi's Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), overthrew the Marxist Derg regime in 1991. The EPRDF's subsequent 27-year rule was built on a system of ethnic federalism that, while managing to contain conflict for a time, institutionalized the TPLF's dominance over the country's political, economic, and security institutions. This created deep-seated grievances among other major ethnic groups, which exploded into political crisis following Zenawi's death in 2012 and culminated in the devastating Tigray War in 2020 under his successor, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. To the north, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), under Isaias Afwerki, led Eritrea to independence in 1993 after a thirty-year war. However, the movement never demobilized its military ethos, using the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia as a pretext to postpone constitutional rule indefinitely, creating one of the world's most militarized and authoritarian states where the liberation-era leadership remains in power. This regional history demonstrates how even sophisticated liberation movements struggle to transition to peacetime governance and often become entangled in the security dilemmas of their neighbors.

It is from this well-documented historical context of global, continental, and regional post-liberation crisis that the specific case of South Sudan emerges. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), founded by Dr. John Garang de Mabior in 1983, was never a monolithic entity; its history is one of continuous internal fragmentation and factional struggle. The most critical historical event foreshadowing the post-independence conflict was the 1991 SPLM/A-Nasir split, in which commanders Riek Machar, Lam Akol, and Gordon Kong attempted a coup against Garang. This political maneuver did not remain within the elite; it immediately fractured the movement along ethnic lines and led to the infamous Bor Massacre of 1991, where forces loyal to Machar killed thousands of Dinka civilians. This event established a devastating historical precedent: elite political competition in South Sudan is invariably translated into large-scale, ethnically-targeted violence [4, 5]. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended the war with Khartoum, was a landmark achievement but fundamentally an elite pact that "froze" these internal SPLM contradictions without resolving them. The sudden death of John Garang in July 2005 created a profound leadership and ideological vacuum, leaving his successor, Salva Kiir Mayardit, to manage the competing ambitions of powerful commanders through a system of patronage during the 2005-2011 interim period [6]. Consequently, South Sudan achieved independence in 2011 with a government that was a fragile coalition of former rivals and a national army that was, in reality, a patchwork of semi-integrated militias. The outbreak of civil war in December 2013 between forces loyal to President Kiir and his dismissed Vice President, Riek Machar, was therefore not a new crisis, but the violent and tragic resurfacing of the historical fissures that have defined the SPLM since its inception [7, 8].

To critically analyze the complex dynamics of South Sudan's protracted crisis, this thesis employs a multi-faceted theoretical framework that integrates insights from several key schools of thought in international relations, comparative politics, and peace studies. This approach moves beyond a single-cause explanation to provide a holistic understanding of the interplay between political behavior, security structures, and state formation. The primary theoretical lenses are the Security Dilemma, Neopatrimonialism and the Resource Curse, and State Formation Theory, complemented by a critical perspective on Liberal Peacebuilding. Together, these frameworks provide the necessary tools to dissect the systemic nature of South Sudan's instability, grounding the analysis in established scholarly debates [9–12].

First and foremost, the Security Dilemma provides the foundational lens for understanding the persistence of armed conflict. Originating in realist international relations theory, the concept posits that in an anarchic environment where actors cannot be certain of each other's intentions, actions taken by one to increase its security are perceived as threatening by others, leading to a spiral of insecurity that may culminate in conflict [13–15]. While traditionally applied to states, this theory has been effectively adapted to explain intrastate conflicts, where the absence of a legitimate and impartial state authority creates a domestic state of anarchy [16, 17]. This lens is crucial for explaining why peace agreements in South Sudan consistently fail, as the pervasive mistrust, rooted in a history of betrayal, ensures that any defensive posturing by one faction is interpreted as an offensive threat by another, fueling a "spiral of insecurity" and a continuous cycle of pre-emptive militarization [9].

Second, neopatrimonialism and the associated resource curse thesis offer a powerful framework for explaining the behavior of South Sudan's political elite and the nature of its governance. Neopatrimonialism describes a hybrid political system where the formal institutions of a modern state coexist with, and are systematically undermined by, informal and personalized patronage networks [3, 18, 19]. In such a

system, political power is not derived from institutional legitimacy but from the leader's ability to distribute state resources to loyal clients, a dynamic de Waal (2015) has termed the "political marketplace." This logic is pathologically intensified in resource-rich countries like South Sudan, where vast oil revenues allow elites to finance their patronage networks without needing to tax or be accountable to their citizens a classic manifestation of the resource curse that links resource abundance with authoritarianism and conflict [20, 21]. This theoretical perspective is essential for understanding why South Sudanese leaders have consistently prioritized factional gain over national development and why state institutions, including the security sector, have been instrumentalized for predation [22].

Third, State Formation Theory provides the macro-historical lens to assess South Sudan's fundamental institutional weaknesses. Foundational scholarship posits that the development of a stable state is contingent upon its ability to consolidate a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and to provide core public goods, thereby securing the loyalty and "legibility" of its population [23, 24]. South Sudan's crisis can be analyzed as a case of arrested or failed state formation, where the state is unable to perform these basic functions. The empirical evidence of a fragmented security sector, the absence of the rule of law, and the near-total collapse of public services are all symptoms of this failure. This theory helps to explain why the security infrastructure is so weak and why the social contract between the state and its citizens is fundamentally broken, leading to a profound crisis of legitimacy that perpetuates both political variability and the security dilemma [25].

Finally, this thesis is informed by a critical perspective on Liberal Peacebuilding. The dominant international approach to post-conflict reconstruction is often based on the "liberal peace" model, which prioritizes the rapid introduction of multiparty elections, free-market reforms, and technical security sector reform (SSR) programs [1, 26]. Critical scholarship argues that this one-size-fits-all, externally-driven approach often fails because it overlooks the local political context, reinforces elite power structures, and can inadvertently exacerbate conflict by introducing new forms of competition without the requisite institutional foundations [27–30]. This critical lens is vital for evaluating the role of international and regional actors in South Sudan. It helps to explain why numerous peace agreements and extensive SSR programs have failed to produce sustainable peace, suggesting that these interventions have not adequately addressed the underlying neopatrimonial logic and security dilemma that drive the conflict.

The crisis that has engulfed South Sudan since its independence cannot be adequately understood through the conventional language of political instability alone. The phenomenon is deeper and more systemic, better conceptualized as a state of chronic political variability. This term captures a condition where the fundamental rules of the game governing political life are themselves constantly in flux, contested, and subject to renegotiation by powerful elites, preventing the emergence of a predictable and institutionalized political order [31]. This is not random chaos but reflects the logic of a hybrid political order where the formal architecture of the state is systematically hollowed out by informal, personalized power networks. In such a system, governance is not a process of impartial administration but a continuous, high-stakes bargaining game, creating a state of perpetual institutional fluidity that makes sustainable development and peace-building all but impossible.

This environment of extreme political variability creates the anarchic domestic conditions for a debilitating intrastate security dilemma. Lacking a credible and impartial state to guarantee their safety, political and communal actors are compelled to pursue self-help strategies for their own protection [16, 17]. Within this context, the security dilemma functions as a powerful engine of conflict, transforming political competition into a militarized struggle for survival. Any action taken by one group to enhance its security be it recruiting fighters, forming alliances, or acquiring weapons is rationally interpreted by its rivals as an emerging threat, compelling them to respond with their own escalatory measures. This self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust and pre-emptive mobilization is not merely a symptom of the conflict in South Sudan; it is a core mechanism that perpetuates it, systematically undermining disarmament initiatives and ensuring that the country remains a patchwork of armed factions rather than a unified nation [9].

The failure to overcome this dynamic is directly reflected in the country's security infrastructure, which this study conceptualizes as a holistic ecosystem of institutions, policies, and norms. This infrastructure is not merely weak or under-resourced; its very function has been inverted. Instead of serving as a neutral provider of public safety and a cornerstone of the state, it has become a primary arena for political competition and an instrument of elite predation [22]. The fragmentation of command, the politicization of recruitment, and the absence of civilian oversight are not simply capacity gaps; they are features of a neopatrimonial system where control over the means of violence is a key source of political power and economic accumulation [32, 33]. Therefore, evaluating this infrastructure requires moving beyond a technical assessment of its capabilities to a critical analysis of its actual political function within the South Sudanese state.

Ultimately, this cycle of political variability and insecurity has led to the active deconstruction of the nation-building project. Nation-building is a dual process, requiring both the construction of effective and legitimate state institutions (state-building) and the fostering of a shared national identity that transcends sub-national loyalties (nation-building) [34, 35]. The evidence from South Sudan's first decade suggests a systematic reversal of both processes. The state's inability to provide basic security or public services has eroded its legitimacy and forced citizens to retreat into ethnic and communal identities for protection and survival [11]. The constant manipulation of these identities by political elites has further undermined social cohesion, making the task of forging a unified nation an ever more distant prospect [1, 6].

The independence of the Republic of South Sudan on July 9, 2011, was not the creation of a state *ex nihilo*, but the formalization of a deeply fragile and historically conditioned entity. The context at the outset of this study's 2011–2021 timeframe was defined by a perilous combination of extreme underdevelopment, a profoundly militarized socio-political landscape, and a precarious regional position. These baseline conditions, established during the 2005–2011 interim period, were not merely challenges for the new state; they were the structural fault lines along which it would soon fracture. Understanding this specific context is essential for analyzing the subsequent eruption of political variability and the security dilemma.

The socio-economic context in 2011 was one of the most challenging in the world. The new nation inherited an economy that was a textbook example of a resource-dependent state, with crude oil exports accounting for an astonishing 98% of the government's total revenue (GoSS, 2012a). This created an extreme vulnerability to global oil price shocks and, more critically, it established control over the state's oil ministry and central bank as the ultimate prize in any political contest [12]. Beyond oil, the economy was almost entirely undeveloped. The physical infrastructure was in ruins after decades of war; a 2012 World Bank report noted that there were fewer than 100 kilometers of paved roads in the entire country, severely hampering trade, security provision, and national integration. Human development indicators were abysmal: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported a maternal mortality rate of 2,054 per 100,000 live births among the highest globally and a female literacy rate of just 16%, indicating a profound deficit in human capital. This context of overwhelming poverty and near-total dependence on oil revenues created a volatile environment where popular expectations for a post-independence peace

dividend were immense, while the state's institutional capacity to deliver services and manage the economy was virtually non-existent [6].

The socio-political and security context was equally precarious, defined by the paradoxical legacy of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The SPLM, as the ruling party, enjoyed immense legitimacy as the vehicle of liberation, yet it had failed to transition from a military movement into a coherent, democratic political party. In 2011, its internal structures remained dominated by powerful military commanders, and political competition was managed through a system of patronage and informal power-sharing rather than through formal, constitutional processes. This was most evident in the structure of the national army, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Far from being a unified, professional force, the SPLA was a patchwork of militias that had been integrated on paper during the CPA period but had not been truly unified in command or loyalty. Powerful commanders often retained direct control over their ethnic-based constituencies, a historical legacy of the movement's fragmented structure that made the state's monopoly on force purely theoretical. Furthermore, society itself was heavily militarized, with the widespread availability of small arms from the previous war creating a context where local disputes over cattle or land could quickly escalate into deadly conflicts. The country's rich ethnic diversity, far from being a source of national strength, had already been deeply politicized, with the Dinka-Nuer rivalry, institutionalized since the 1991 SPLM split, remaining the central, unresolved fault line in national politics [36].

Finally, the regional geopolitical context in 2011 was fraught with tension and unresolved issues, primarily with the government in Khartoum. The secession had left several critical elements of the CPA dangerously unsettled. The final status of the oil-rich Abyei area remained a point of intense dispute, threatening to become a flashpoint for renewed war. The 2,000-kilometer border was largely undemarcated, creating ambiguity and potential for conflict over grazing land and other resources. Most critically, no long-term agreement had been reached on the oil transit fees that landlocked South Sudan would have to pay to use Sudan's pipelines and port infrastructure. This economic lifeline placed Juba in a position of extreme vulnerability to pressure from Khartoum [12]. Beyond Sudan, other regional powers held significant stakes. Uganda, under President Yoweri Museveni, had been a crucial military backer of the SPLA and President Kiir and viewed a stable South Sudan as a key security and economic partner [37, 38]. Ethiopia and Kenya, as key members of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) that had mediated the CPA, were deeply invested in regional stability but also had competing economic and political interests. This complex web of regional interests meant that South Sudan was born into a volatile neighborhood where its internal political and security dynamics would be constantly shaped, and often manipulated, by the strategic calculations of its powerful neighbors.

## Statement of the Problem

The independence of South Sudan in 2011 was intended to mark the end of conflict and the beginning of a stable, sovereign nationhood. This aspiration, however, has remained tragically unfulfilled. The nation's first decade has been defined not by peace and development, but by a catastrophic civil war, persistent political crises, a collapsed economy, and a humanitarian disaster that has left millions displaced and insecure. Despite numerous internationally-mediated peace agreements, including the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the country remains trapped in a state of profound fragility, unable to build legitimate institutions or provide basic security for its citizens [39].

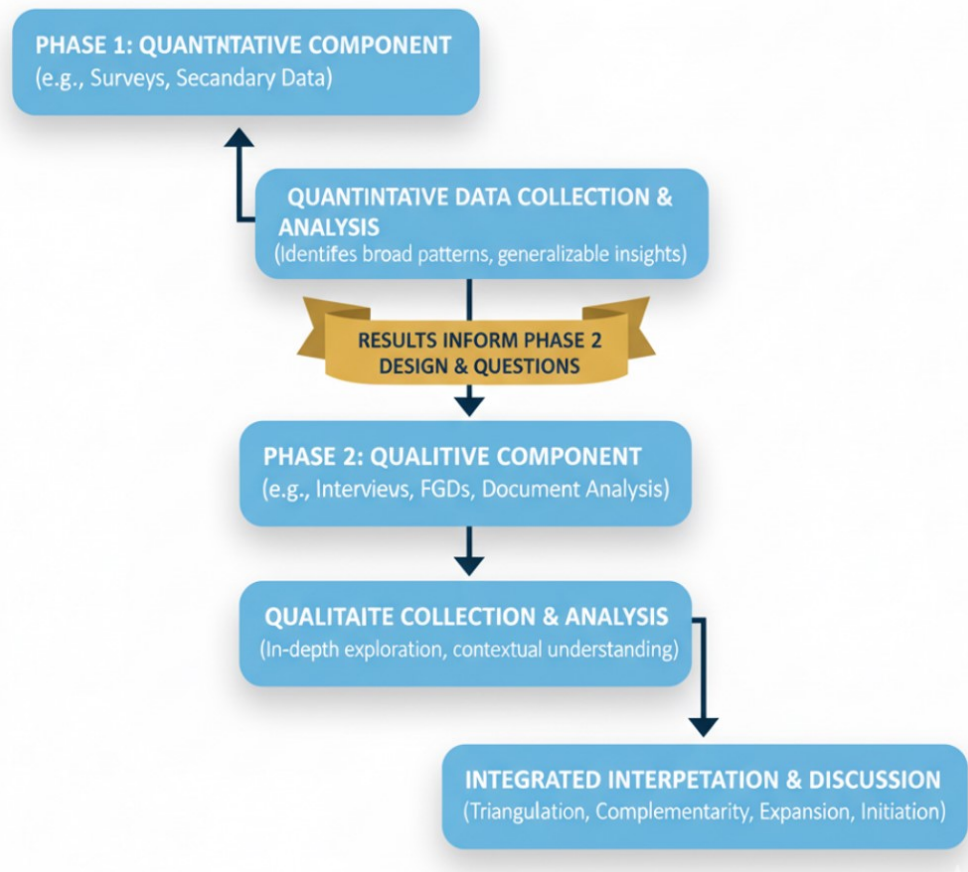
The central problem, which this thesis addresses, is the failure of existing analyses and interventions to adequately grasp the systemic, self-reinforcing cycle between political variability and the security dilemma that lies at the heart of South Sudan's protracted crisis. Much of the scholarship has treated the country's political failures, institutional weaknesses, and security sector collapse as separate issues [12]. There is a critical gap in understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between these phenomena: the chronic political instability, driven by a neopatrimonial marketplace of elite competition, continuously creates the anarchic conditions that fuel the security dilemma. In turn, the security dilemma, with its pervasive mistrust and pre-emptive militarization, ensures that political disputes are inevitably militarized, preventing the formation of a unified national security infrastructure and perpetuating the very political fragmentation that started the cycle [12, 40].

This study argues that cyclical interplay is not merely the actions of individual "spoilers", but isolated institutional capacity gaps constitutes the fundamental barrier to peace and state-building in South Sudan. The failure to analyze and address this core dynamic has rendered both national reform efforts and international peacebuilding interventions largely ineffective. Consequently, the state's security infrastructure has become an engine of instability, the social contract has been broken, and the project of nation-building has been actively reversed. This thesis seeks to fill this analytical gap by providing a critical, integrated analysis of this destructive cycle, examining its effects on the security infrastructure and the agency of the leaders who perpetuate it, in order to identify the systemic transformations required for sustainable peace.

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

To comprehensively address the research questions concerning political variability and security in post-conflict South Sudan, a sequential explanatory mixed methods design was employed [41]. This design, defined as a two-phase approach where quantitative data collection and analysis are followed by qualitative data collection and analysis, uses the qualitative findings to help explain and interpret the initial quantitative results [42]. This approach was deemed most appropriate because it allowed for the identification of broad patterns and relationships through quantitative data, which could then be explored in greater depth and detail through qualitative inquiry [43].



**Figure 1:** Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Design

Figure 1 visually represents the sequential explanatory mixed methods design used in this study, highlighting the distinct phases and their integration points.

Figure 1 depicts the two-phase structure of the sequential explanatory design, showing how quantitative results from Phase 1 informed the qualitative inquiry in Phase 2, leading to an integrated and nuanced interpretation. This visual emphasizes the explanatory role of the qualitative phase in providing deeper insights into the quantitative findings.

The rationale for adopting a mixed methods approach stemmed from the inherent limitations of relying solely on either qualitative or quantitative methods in isolation within such a dynamic context [44]. Purely quantitative approaches, while offering generalizability and statistical insights into patterns and correlations, often struggle to capture the nuanced human experiences, contextual factors, and underlying causal mechanisms crucial for understanding security dilemmas in post-conflict settings [45]. Conversely, purely qualitative approaches, while providing rich, in-depth understanding of individual experiences and perspectives, might lack the generalizability needed to draw broader conclusions about systemic political variability and its impact on security across diverse populations [46]. By integrating these approaches, the research aimed to achieve triangulation, complementarity, expansion, and initiation [47]. Triangulation, defined as the use of multiple methods or data sources to corroborate findings, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the research. Complementarity allowed for different facets of the phenomenon to be explored, where qualitative data explained quantitative results, and quantitative data contextualized qualitative insights. Expansion enabled the researcher to broaden the scope of the study, exploring different levels of analysis or different aspects of the research question that might have been missed by a single method. Finally, initiation involved discovering paradoxes or contradictions that led to new research questions or re-conceptualizations of the phenomenon, which was particularly valuable in a complex and evolving post-conflict environment. This sequential explanatory design thus provided a robust framework for a holistic understanding of the interplay between political variability and security in South Sudan.

**Table 1:** Target Population Categories and Research Relevance

Stakeholder Group	Description	Relevance to the Study
Government Officials (GO)	Individuals working within government ministries and institutions.	Provided insights into state policy formulation, governance challenges, and post-conflict administration.
Military and Security Leaders (ML)	Senior personnel from the security sector (e.g., army, police, intelligence).	Offered perspectives on security operations, institutional reforms, and threats to stability.
Political Leaders (PL)	Politicians involved in parties, legislative bodies, and peace negotiations.	Contributed views on political dynamics, power-sharing, and transitional governance.
Civil Society and Community Leaders (CSL)	Members of NGOs, community-based organizations, traditional authorities, and advocacy groups.	Provided grassroots-level insights into the lived impacts of political and security challenges.
International Actors (IA)	Staff from diplomatic missions, international NGOs, and multilateral agencies.	Shared external viewpoints on intervention strategies, peacebuilding efforts, and international coordination.

## 2.2. Target Population

The target population, defined as the complete set of individuals or cases from which a sample is drawn and to which the researcher wishes to generalize the findings [41, 48], for this study comprised individuals and groups directly affected by or involved in political variability and security dynamics within post-conflict South Sudan. This broad definition was essential to capture the diverse perspectives and experiences necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The target population of this study was 10,000 relevant stakeholders in Juba. The selection of these diverse groups was predicated on the understanding that political variability and security are experienced and influenced differently by various segments of society, and their collective insights were crucial for triangulation and a holistic analysis.

Given the vastness and logistical challenges of conducting research across the entirety of South Sudan, a specific geographical focus was determined during the planning phase to ensure feasibility and depth of inquiry [49]. The primary geographical scope of the interviews centered in Juba, the capital, due to its concentration of political, military, and international actors. However, supplementary insights were gathered from individuals with extensive experience in Bentiu (Unity State) and Malakal (Upper Nile State), representing key conflict-affected regions, thereby enriching the contextual understanding of the data. This deliberate selection process aimed to provide a comprehensive and balanced empirical base for the study's interpretations.

The target population was categorized into distinct stakeholder groups, reflecting their varied roles and experiences concerning political variability and security in South Sudan. These groups included:

- **Government Officials (GO):** Individuals holding positions within various government ministries and institutions, whose insights were crucial for understanding policy formulation, implementation, and the challenges of governance in a post-conflict state.
- **Military and Security Leaders (ML):** Senior officers and personnel from various security sector institutions, providing firsthand experience in security operations, challenges, and reforms.
- **Political Leaders (PL):** Individuals involved in political parties, legislative bodies, or peace processes, offering perspectives on elite dynamics, power-sharing, and political stability.
- **Civil Society and Community Leaders (CSL):** Representatives from local and international non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and traditional leaders, providing grassroots perspectives on security, peacebuilding, and the impact of political variability on communities.
- **International Actors (IA):** Personnel from international organizations, diplomatic missions, and humanitarian agencies, offering an external, often critical, view on interventions, capacity building, and the broader international context.

Table 1 provides a summary of the target population categories and their relevance to the study.

## 2.3. Sampling Design / procedures/techniques

Sampling refers to the process of selecting a subset of individuals or cases from a larger population to participate in a research study [41, 50]. The sampling design for this study was a multi-stage process that combined both purposive sampling and stratified sampling techniques. This approach was strategically chosen to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives on the intricate political and security dynamics of South Sudan, aligning with the pragmatic philosophy and mixed methods design.

### Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher relies on their own judgment to select participants who are considered most knowledgeable or representative of the phenomenon under study [51, 52]. This technique was primarily employed for the qualitative component of the study. The rationale for using purposive sampling was to identify and select individuals who possessed specific expertise, direct experience, or significant influence within their respective domains concerning political variability and security in South Sudan [53]. This ensured that the insights gathered were both informed and relevant to the research objectives.

The selection criteria for purposive sampling included:

1. **Expertise:** Individuals with deep knowledge of South Sudanese politics, security sector dynamics, peace processes, and post-conflict challenges.
2. **Experience:** Participants who had direct involvement or extensive experience in policy-making, security operations, civil society initiatives, or international interventions in South Sudan.
3. **Influence:** Key stakeholders whose decisions or actions significantly impacted the political and security landscape.
4. **Diversity of Perspectives:** Ensuring representation from different political affiliations, ethnic backgrounds, geographical locations (Juba, Bentiu, Malakal), and institutional roles to capture a comprehensive understanding.

### Stratified Sampling

Stratified sampling is a probability sampling technique that involves dividing a population into smaller subgroups, or strata, based on shared characteristics, and then randomly selecting participants from each stratum [54]. While primarily a quantitative technique, elements of stratification were applied to the selection of qualitative participants to ensure representation across the identified stakeholder categories. This approach was critical for capturing the multi-layered nature of the challenges, from high-level policy-making to grassroots experiences. The strata were the five distinct categories of participants identified in the target population: Government Officials (GO), Military and Security Leaders (ML), Political Leaders (PL), Civil Society and Community Leaders (CSL), and International Actors (IA). This stratified purposive approach allowed for a systematic selection of participants within each stratum, ensuring that each category was adequately represented and contributed unique insights to the study. For instance, Government Officials included those involved in security sector governance and policy implementation, while Military Leaders comprised senior officers with firsthand experience in security operations and integration challenges. Political Leaders offered perspectives on elite dynamics and peace processes. Civil Society Leaders provided insights into civilian protection and local governance, and International Actors contributed an external, often critical, view on interventions and capacity building.

### 2.4. Determination of Sample Size

Sample size refers to the number of individuals or cases included in a research study [55]. The determination of sample size in mixed methods research involves considerations for both qualitative and quantitative components. For this study, the qualitative component was dominant, and its sample size was primarily guided by the principle of data saturation, while the quantitative aspect, though smaller, aimed for sufficient representation.

#### Qualitative Sample Size: Data Saturation

For the qualitative component, the sample size was determined by the concept of data saturation, which is reached when no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection [56, 57]. This iterative process involved continuous data collection and analysis until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that further interviews or observations would not yield novel information relevant to the research questions [58]. This approach is widely accepted in qualitative research for ensuring the depth and richness of data without over-collecting [59]. In this study, a total of 55 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and May 2021 (Chapter 4, p. 109). These interviews were distributed across the five distinct stakeholder categories to ensure comprehensive coverage of perspectives. The distribution was not predetermined by a rigid formula but emerged from the iterative process of data collection and analysis, prioritizing the attainment of saturation within each stratum and across the overall research objectives.

Table 2 presents the final distribution of the qualitative sample across the various stakeholder categories, as detailed in Chapter 4.

**Table 2:** Final Qualitative Sample Distribution by Stakeholder Category

Stakeholder Category	Number of Participants	Percentage of Total Sample (%)
Government Officials (GO)	12	21.8%
Military and Security Leaders (ML)	10	18.2%
Political Leaders (PL)	11	20.0%
Civil Society and Community Leaders (CSL)	12	21.8%
International Actors (IA)	10	18.2%
Total	55	100.0%

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the 55 participants interviewed for the qualitative component of the study, categorized by their respective stakeholder groups. This distribution reflects the strategic effort to gather diverse perspectives crucial for understanding the complex security dynamics in South Sudan.

#### Quantitative Sample Size

While the primary focus of this study was qualitative, the mixed methods design conceptually allowed for a quantitative component, which, if fully implemented, would have required a different approach to sample size determination. For illustrative purposes, had a survey been conducted as a standalone quantitative phase, the sample size would typically be calculated using statistical formulas to ensure representativeness and generalizability to a larger population [60].

This study adopted Yamane's formula (1967) for determining sample size in survey research. A common formula for calculating sample size for a finite population is:

$$n = \frac{N \times X}{X + N - 1}$$

Where,

'n' = Required sample size

'N' = Population size

$$X = \frac{Z^2 \times P(1 - P)}{MOE^2}$$

Where,

Z = Z-score for the desired confidence level (e.g., 1.96 for 95% confidence)

P = estimated proportion of the population (e.g., 0.5 for maximum variability)

MOE = Margin Of Error (e.g., 0.05 for 5% margin of error)

For instance, assuming a hypothetical population (N) of 10,000 relevant stakeholders in Juba, a 95% confidence level (Z=1.96), a maximum variability (P=0.5), and a 5% margin of error (MOE=0.05):

$$X = \frac{1.96^2 \times 0.5(1 - 0.5)}{0.05^2}$$

$$X = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.0025}$$

$$X = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}, X = 384.16$$

$$n = \frac{10000 \times 384.16}{384.16 + 10000 - 1}, n = \frac{3841600}{10383.16}$$

$$n = 370$$

This is done according to Yamane's formula (1967). The calculation would suggest a quantitative sample size of approximately 370 participants for a survey component to achieve statistical representativeness. However, given the primary qualitative nature of this study and the challenges of conducting large-scale surveys in post-conflict South Sudan, the qualitative sample size was prioritized for in-depth understanding rather than statistical generalizability. The mixed methods design allowed for the integration of qualitative insights to provide a rich, contextualized understanding that complemented any potential broader patterns identified through secondary quantitative data analysis.

## 2.5. Data Collection Instruments (Methods of Data Collection)

Data collection instruments are the tools used to gather data for a research study (Bernard, 2017). Given the sequential explanatory mixed methods design and the pragmatic philosophical stance, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments was employed to capture the multifaceted nature of political variability and security in post-conflict South Sudan (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The primary instruments included semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations, with a conceptual consideration for surveys for the quantitative component.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the primary qualitative data collection instrument, defined as a flexible interview technique where the researcher uses a predetermined set of open-ended questions but allows for deviation and exploration of emergent themes based on the interviewee's responses [46]. This approach was particularly suitable for this study as it allowed for in-depth exploration of complex issues, capturing nuanced perspectives and personal experiences from the diverse stakeholder groups [61]. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews facilitated probing for deeper insights into the causes and effects of political variability on security, as well as the lived realities of the security dilemma in South Sudan [49]. An interview guide was developed, comprising key themes derived from the research questions and theoretical framework (Chapter 2). These themes included perceptions of political stability, drivers of insecurity, roles of various actors, effectiveness of security institutions, and experiences with peacebuilding initiatives. The guide served as a roadmap, ensuring consistency across interviews while allowing for the organic emergence of new topics relevant to the interviewee's expertise [62]. All interviews were conducted in English, with local interpreters engaged when necessary to ensure accurate communication and understanding, particularly with community leaders.

### Document Analysis

Document analysis involved the systematic review and evaluation of various written and visual materials relevant to the research questions [63]. This method served as a crucial source of secondary data, providing historical context, policy insights, and corroborating evidence for the primary data collected through interviews [64]. Documents analyzed included government reports, policy papers, peace agreements, academic literature, reports from international organizations (e.g., UN, AU), NGO publications, and reputable news articles [65]. The process of document analysis involved several steps: identifying relevant documents, screening them for authenticity and credibility, reading and coding them for key themes and patterns, and interpreting their significance in relation to the research objectives. This method was particularly valuable for understanding the broader political landscape, historical trajectories of conflict, and formal institutional responses to security challenges, which complemented the individual perspectives gathered through interviews (Chapter 4, p. 109).

## Field Observations

Field observations involved direct engagement with the research environment, allowing the researcher to gain firsthand insights into the social, political, and security dynamics of post-conflict South Sudan [52]. This method included both participant observation (where the researcher actively participates in the activities of the group being studied) and non-participant observation (where the researcher observes without direct involvement). Due to the sensitive nature of the research context, non-participant observation was predominantly employed, focusing on observing public spaces, community interactions, security checkpoints, and the general atmosphere in Juba and other visited areas. Observations were systematically recorded through field notes, capturing details about the physical environment, social interactions, non-verbal cues, and any events relevant to political variability and security [66]. This instrument provided contextual richness, helping to interpret interview data and offering a deeper understanding of the lived realities of security challenges that might not have been explicitly articulated by interviewees [49]. Field observations also played a critical role in navigating security challenges during fieldwork, allowing for real-time assessment of the environment and adaptation of research strategies.

## 2.6. Data Collection Procedures (Source of Primary and Secondary Data)

Data collection procedures refer to the systematic steps taken to gather information for a research study. The data collection for this study was conducted between February and May 2021, following ethical approval from the University of Juba Institutional Review Board (IRB). The process involved a combination of primary and secondary data sources, strategically integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

## 2.7. Primary Data Collection

Primary data refers to original data collected specifically for the current research project. For this study, primary data was predominantly qualitative, gathered through semi-structured interviews and field observations.

### Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted with the 55 selected participants across the five stakeholder categories Table 2. Potential participants were identified through professional networks, snowball sampling (where initial participants recommend others), and publicly available information. An initial email or phone call was made to explain the research purpose, assure confidentiality, and request their participation. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form, explaining the study's objectives, their rights, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Verbal consent was also obtained and recorded [41]. Interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting, either face-to-face or via secure online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Skype) depending on the participant's location and preference. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. The researcher maintained a neutral and empathetic demeanor, actively listening and probing for deeper insights [61]. With the explicit permission of participants, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of data. These recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and stored securely.

### Field Observation Procedures

Field observations were conducted concurrently with interviews, primarily in Juba, with supplementary observations from Bentiu and Malakal. The researcher engaged in systematic, non-participant observation of public spaces, institutional environments, and community interactions relevant to political and security dynamics. This included observing security checkpoints, public gatherings, and the general socio-political atmosphere. Detailed field notes were meticulously recorded immediately after observations, capturing descriptive accounts of events, interactions, and contextual details, as well as reflective notes on the researcher's own thoughts and feelings [66]. Given the sensitive context, observations were conducted ethically, respecting privacy and avoiding any actions that could compromise the safety or anonymity of individuals.

### Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data refers to data that has been collected by someone else for a purpose other than the current research. For this study, secondary data was primarily collected through document analysis.

### Document Analysis Procedures

The collection of secondary data through document analysis involved relevant documents were identified through academic databases, institutional websites (e.g., government ministries, UN agencies, NGOs), and recommendations from key informants [63]. Documents were accessed through public domain sources, institutional libraries, or by direct request to relevant organizations. Digital copies were prioritized for ease of storage and analysis [65]. Each document was systematically reviewed for content relevant to political variability, security, the security dilemma, and post-conflict dynamics in South Sudan. Key information, statistics, policy statements, and narratives were extracted and cataloged [64]. All documents were organized, coded, and stored in a secure digital repository, ensuring easy retrieval and cross-referencing during the analysis phase.

Figure 2 illustrates the integrated approach to data collection, combining primary and secondary sources.

Figure 2 visually represents the comprehensive approach to data collection, highlighting the distinct primary and secondary sources utilized in the study. This integration ensured a robust and triangulated dataset for a holistic understanding of the research problem.

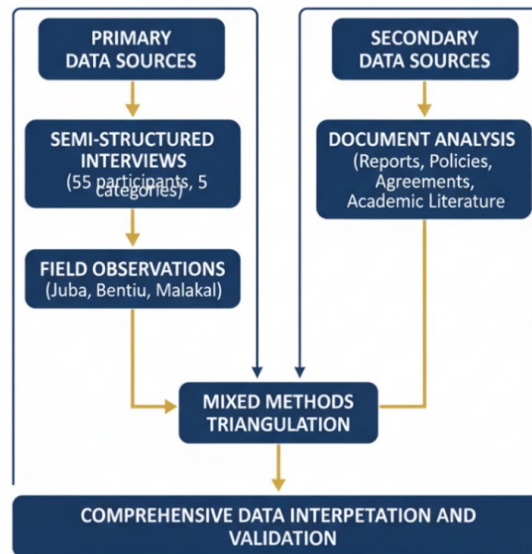


Figure 2: Integrated Data Collection Strategy

### Piloting of Research Instrument

Piloting a research instrument is the process of testing your questionnaire, interview guide, or measurement tool on a small sample before the main study to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity which have been observed in this study. Scholars emphasize that piloting strengthens methodological rigor, identifies weaknesses, and improves the credibility of findings. Kimotho (2025) argues that piloting should be seen not just as preparation but as a generative phase that enhances methodological rigor, ethical reflexivity, and contextual responsiveness. Kimotho (2025) pilot studies should be recognized as legitimate sites of knowledge production, not just preliminary steps. Creswell & Creswell (2018) [41]: Emphasize that pilot testing helps ensure instruments are both reliable and valid before large-scale data collection.

### 2.8. Validity and Reliability of Instruments

Validity refers to the extent to which a research instrument accurately measures what it is intended to measure, while reliability refers to the consistency and stability of the measurements [67]. In qualitative research, these concepts are often re-conceptualized as trustworthiness, encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [68]. Validity is the accuracy of measurement. There isn't a single universal formula, but the most common statistical approach is the Correlation Coefficient (r):

$$R = \frac{\sum(X - X^-)(Y - Y^-)}{\sqrt{\sum(X - X^-)^2 \sum(Y - Y^-)^2}}$$

X = scores from your test

Y = scores from the benchmark or criterion

r = ranges from -1 to +1 (closer to +1 = stronger validity)

Reliability is the consistency of measurement. The most commonly used and trusted formula is Cornbrash's Alpha for internal consistency:

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left( 1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_i^2}{\sigma_t^2} \right)$$

k = number of items

$\sigma_i^2$  = variance of each item

$\sigma_t^2$  = total test variance

Acceptable range: 0.70–0.90

### 2.9. Credibility (Internal Validity)

Credibility, analogous to internal validity in quantitative research, refers to the extent to which the findings are believable and accurately represent the participants' experiences and the phenomenon under study [68]. To enhance credibility, several strategies were employed:

1. **Triangulation:** As discussed earlier, data from multiple sources (interviews, documents, observations) were compared and cross-referenced to corroborate findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding [44].
2. **Member Checking:** Key findings and interpretations were shared with a subset of participants to verify their accuracy and ensure that the researcher's understanding aligned with their lived experiences [69]. This iterative process helped to refine interpretations and enhance the authenticity of the findings.

3. **Prolonged Engagement:** The researcher spent an extended period in the field, fostering trust with participants and gaining a deeper understanding of the context, which helped to overcome superficial interpretations and build rapport [68].
4. **Peer Debriefing:** Regular discussions with academic supervisors and peers provided an external check on the research process, interpretations, and potential biases, ensuring rigor and objectivity [70].

## 2.10. Transferability (External Validity)

Transferability, akin to external validity, refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts or populations. While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalizability, it strives for contextual transferability. To enhance transferability, the researcher provided thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and methods, allowing readers to judge the applicability of the findings to their own settings [71]. Detailed accounts of the political, social, and security landscape of South Sudan, along with the characteristics of the participant groups, were provided to facilitate this assessment.

## 2.11. Dependability (Reliability)

Dependability, similar to reliability, concerns the consistency and stability of the research process over time. To ensure dependability, a dependability audit was conceptually maintained through meticulous record-keeping. This involved maintaining an audit trail of all research decisions, data collection procedures, data analysis steps, and theoretical developments [72]. This transparent documentation allowed for an external reviewer to follow the research process and confirm its consistency.

## 2.12. Confirmability (Objectivity)

Confirmability, related to objectivity, refers to the extent to which the findings are shaped by the respondents and the inquiry, rather than solely by the researcher's biases. To ensure confirmability, a confirmability audit was conceptually applied, involving the systematic documentation of the researcher's assumptions, biases, and theoretical predispositions. This reflexivity helped to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases, ensuring that the interpretations were grounded in the data [73]. The audit trail also allowed for tracing the data to its sources, ensuring that interpretations were supported by empirical evidence.

## 2.13. Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis is the process of systematically applying statistical and/or logical techniques to describe, condense, and recap data. For this mixed methods study, data analysis involved distinct procedures for the qualitative and conceptual quantitative components, followed by an integrated interpretation [41]. The primary focus was on qualitative data analysis, which aimed to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within the rich textual data collected.

### Qualitative Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was the primary method employed for analyzing the qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations [74]. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data, providing a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. This approach was chosen for its ability to systematically organize and describe the dataset in rich detail, as well as to interpret various aspects of the research topic [75]. The process of thematic analysis followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

**Familiarizing with the data:** This initial phase involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts, document summaries, and field notes to gain a deep understanding of the content and to immerse the researcher in the data. Initial thoughts and potential patterns were noted [74].

**Generating initial codes:** This involved systematically coding interesting features of the data across the entire dataset. Coding is the process of assigning labels or tags to segments of text that represent a particular idea, concept, or action [76]. Both descriptive and in-vivo codes were used to capture the essence of the participants' statements and observations [64].

**Searching for themes:** Codes were then grouped into potential themes, which are broader patterns of meaning that capture something important about the data in relation to the research question. This involved reviewing codes and combining them into coherent themes.

**Reviewing themes:** This phase involved refining the themes. Themes were checked against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the data and were distinct from each other. Sub-themes were also identified to provide further detail.

**Defining and naming themes:** Once the themes were refined, they were clearly defined and given concise, descriptive names. This involved articulating the essence of each theme and identifying what aspect of the data it captured.

**Producing the report:** The final phase involved writing up the analysis, providing compelling evidence from the data (e.g., direct quotes from interviews, excerpts from documents) to support each theme. This phase connected the analysis back to the research questions and the existing literature.

Software such as NVivo (QSR International) was utilized to assist in organizing, coding, and managing the large volume of qualitative data, enhancing the rigor and transparency of the analysis process [77].

## Conceptual Quantitative Data Analysis

While the study's primary data collection was qualitative, the mixed methods design conceptually allowed for the integration of quantitative insights. This involved the analysis of secondary quantitative data (e.g., conflict statistics, economic indicators) obtained through document analysis, which was used to contextualize and complement the qualitative findings [41]. Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages, means) were employed to summarize and present relevant numerical data, providing a broader understanding of trends in political variability and security incidents in South Sudan.

## Integrated Interpretation

The final stage of data analysis involved the integrated interpretation of both qualitative and conceptual quantitative findings [78]. This integration occurred at the interpretation phase, where the qualitative themes were used to explain and elaborate on any patterns or trends identified from the secondary quantitative data, and vice versa [43]. This process of triangulation (as discussed in Section 3.3) allowed for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research problem, leveraging the strengths of both approaches to provide a holistic picture of the effects of political variability on security in post-conflict South Sudan [47].

## 2.14. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in any research, particularly when conducting studies in sensitive post-conflict environments involving vulnerable populations [79]. This research adhered strictly to ethical guidelines to protect the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants and to ensure the integrity of the research process (British Sociological Association, 2017). The ethical framework was guided by principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for persons, and justice [80].

### Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Prior to commencing any data collection, full ethical approval was obtained from the University of Juba Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval ensured that the research design, data collection instruments, and procedures met international ethical standards for research involving human subjects. The IRB reviewed the research proposal, consent forms, and interview guides to safeguard against potential risks and ensure the ethical conduct of the study.

### Informed Consent

Informed consent is a fundamental ethical principle requiring that participants voluntarily agree to participate in research after being fully informed about its purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits (World Medical Association, 2013). For this study, a comprehensive informed consent process was implemented. Participants were explicitly informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point without penalty. The research objectives, methodology, and expected outcomes were clearly explained in a language accessible to all participants. For those who preferred, explanations were provided through local interpreters. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that their responses would be anonymized in all research outputs. Pseudonyms were used for direct quotes, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports. Participants were informed of their right to refuse to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with [61].

### Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality refers to the agreement between the researcher and participant about how the participant's identifiable data will be handled, while anonymity means that the participant's identity is unknown to the researcher [67]. Given the sensitive political and security context of South Sudan, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity was paramount. All collected data, including interview recordings and transcripts, were stored securely on password-protected devices, accessible only to the researcher. Identifying information was removed during transcription, and participants were assigned unique codes to maintain their anonymity in all research outputs.

### Minimizing Harm and Ensuring Safety

The principle of non-maleficence dictates that researchers must strive to do no harm to their participants. In a post-conflict setting, this involved proactive measures to minimize potential risks. The researcher maintained a high level of awareness of the local political and security situation, adapting fieldwork plans as necessary to ensure the safety of both the researcher and participants. Interview questions were carefully framed to avoid causing distress or placing participants at risk. The researcher was trained to handle sensitive topics with empathy and discretion. While not explicitly required, the researcher was prepared to provide information on local support services (e.g., counseling, legal aid) if participants expressed distress that warranted such assistance.

### Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Researcher positionality refers to the researcher's social and political context, including their gender, race, class, and other characteristics, and how these might influence the research process [81]. Reflexivity is the process of critically reflecting on one's own biases, assumptions, and values, and how these might shape the research design, data collection, and interpretation [73]. In this study, the researcher acknowledged their position as an external academic, which could influence participant responses and interpretations of the data [82]. To address positionality and enhance reflexivity, the researcher: Maintained a research journal to document personal reflections, biases, and evolving understandings throughout the fieldwork. Engaged in regular discussions with supervisors and peers to critically examine interpretations and challenge preconceived notions [70]. Actively sought diverse perspectives during data collection to avoid a singular narrative and to ensure a balanced

representation of views. This commitment to ethical conduct and reflexivity aimed to ensure that the research was not only methodologically sound but also morally responsible, particularly in a context marked by historical trauma and ongoing vulnerabilities.

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### 3.1. Effects of Political Variability and Security

##### Elite Fragmentation and Governance Paralysis

The pervasive nature of elite fragmentation emerged as a dominant theme across interviews, with respondents consistently highlighting the deep divisions within the political leadership as a primary driver of governance paralysis. These divisions were frequently described as transcending ideological differences, often rooted in personal loyalties, ethnic affiliations, and competition over resources, rather than programmatic visions for the nation. The consequences, as articulated by those interviewed, were a profound inability to forge consensus on critical national issues and a constant undermining of institutional processes. This fragmentation, a common feature in post-conflict states, is exacerbated in South Sudan by the legacy of a liberation struggle that prioritized military unity over political cohesion, leading to a governing elite that struggles to transition from wartime alliances to peacetime political institutions [6]. The inability of the political leadership to present a united front on national policy, security sector reform, or economic development was repeatedly cited as the single most significant impediment to progress. The constant internal strife, often manifesting in public disagreements and power struggles, creates an environment of uncertainty that discourages investment, undermines public trust, and diverts attention and resources from critical state-building tasks [83, 84].

One senior government official lamented the constant internal strife, stating:

*"The biggest problem we face is not external enemies, but ourselves. The leadership is so fractured, everyone is pulling in a different direction. There is no common vision, only competing interests. This paralysis trickles down to every ministry, every state, every county."* (GO4, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

This sentiment was echoed by a prominent civil society leader, who observed the detrimental impact on policy implementation and public service delivery:

*"When the top leadership cannot agree, how can anything function? Policies are made, but they are never fully implemented because someone at the top will always undermine them for their own gain or to weaken a rival. It's a constant battle, and the people suffer."* (CSL2, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

Further reinforcing this perspective, an international actor with extensive experience in South Sudan pointed to the historical roots of these divisions:

*"The fragmentation we see today is not new; it's an evolution of wartime alliances and rivalries that were never truly resolved. The CPA and even R-ARCSS tried to paper over these cracks, but they remain, and they define the political landscape."* (IA1, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

The lack of a unified vision among the elite was frequently cited as a critical impediment to effective governance. Respondents described a political environment where personal survival and factional advancement often overshadowed national interests, leading to a constant state of flux and uncertainty. A former political leader articulated the challenge of building a cohesive government:

*"Every decision becomes a negotiation, a trade-off. It's not about what's best for the country, but about who benefits, whose faction gains power. This makes governing impossible, and the institutions become mere tools in this power struggle."* (PL3, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This perspective was supported by a military leader, who highlighted the impact of political divisions on the security sector:

*"Our forces are supposed to be national, but loyalty often goes to a commander, a politician, a tribe, not the state. This is because the politicians themselves are divided, and they use us as their pawns. How can you build a national army when the leadership is so fragmented?"* (ML1, interviewed in Bentiu, April 2021).

Moreover, the constant reshuffling of government positions and the creation of new administrative units were seen as symptoms of this fragmentation, designed to appease various factions rather than to improve governance. A local community leader expressed frustration with the endless political maneuvering:

*"Every few months, there's a new governor, a new minister. Each one comes with their own people, their own agenda. Nothing ever gets done because there's no continuity, no long-term plan. It's just musical chairs at the top."* (CSL5, interviewed in Malakal, May 2021).

This is in support with a senior civil servant who observed the debilitating effect on bureaucratic efficiency:

*"The civil service is demoralized. Why work hard when your boss might be replaced next week, and his successor brings in his own team? There's no incentive for professionalism or long-term planning. It's all short-term, politically driven."* (GO2, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

2021).

The cumulative effect of this elite fragmentation, as evidenced by these multiple accounts, is a profound governance paralysis that prevents the state from effectively addressing the pressing needs of its citizens and consolidating peace. The continuous struggle for power and resources among the elite directly undermines the very institutions designed to provide stability and public services, creating a vicious cycle of political variability and institutional decay.

**Table 3:** Major Political Crises and Governance Performance Indicators (2011-2021)

Year	Major Political Crisis/Event	Key Actors Involved	Governance Indicator Impact	Source
2013	Internal SPLM power struggle, outbreak of civil war	Salva Kiir, Riek Machar, various factions	Significant decline in rule of law, human rights, political stability	ICG (2014), UNMISS (2014)
2015	Signing of ARCSS, subsequent collapse	IGAD, AU, UN, GoSS, SPLM-IO	Temporary improvement in political stability, quickly reversed	Rolandsen & Schomerus (2017), ICG (2016)
2016	Renewed fighting in Juba, Machar flees	GoSS, SPLM-IO	Severe deterioration in security, governance, and humanitarian situation	HRW (2017), Amnesty International (2016)
2018	Signing of R-ARCSS	IGAD, AU, UN, GoSS, SPLM-IO,SSOA	Cautious optimism, but slow implementation, continued mistrust	ICG (2019), Small Arms Survey (2020)
2020	Formation of R-TGoNU, appointment of Machar as FVP	GoSS, SPLM-IO, SSOA	Partial implementation of power-sharing, but persistent delays in security sector reform	UNMISS (2020), African Arguments (2020)
2021	Delays in unification of forces, constitutional review process stalled	GoSS, SPLM-IO	Continued political deadlock, heightened inter-communal violence	ICG (2021), Small Arms Survey (2021)

The data presented in Table 3 rigorously illustrates the episodic yet persistent nature of political crises in South Sudan since its independence in 2011, directly reflecting the concept of political variability. Each entry in the table represents a critical juncture where elite fragmentation and power struggles manifested in events that profoundly impacted governance and stability. The initial optimism following independence quickly gave way to internal divisions within the ruling SPLM, culminating in the devastating civil war of 2013 [8, 85]. This period marked a precipitous decline in all governance indicators, as the nascent state institutions were overwhelmed by armed conflict and political infighting. The inability of the leadership to manage internal dissent through peaceful political means, opting instead for military confrontation, underscored a fundamental weakness in the political system that has persisted throughout the decade [6, 86].

The repeated attempts at peace, notably the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), while offering momentary respite, ultimately failed to fundamentally alter the trajectory of political variability. The table highlights how the signing of these agreements was often followed by renewed conflict or significant delays in implementation, such as the renewed fighting in Juba in 2016 and the persistent delays in security sector reform post-2020 [87, 88]. These patterns suggest that the agreements, rather than resolving the underlying elite fragmentation, often became new arenas for power struggles, with signatories viewing them as tactical pauses rather than definitive solutions. The consistent presence of the same key actors in these crises further emphasizes the entrenched nature of the elite divisions and their enduring impact on the political landscape.

Respondents frequently articulated how these documented crises were not isolated incidents but rather manifestations of a deeper, systemic issue of elite capture and a zero-sum approach to power. A senior political leader, reflecting on the post-independence period, stated:

*“Every crisis, every conflict, every agreement broken – it all comes back to the same thing: a fight for power and resources among a very small group of people. The country is just a prize to be won, not a nation to be built.”* (PL1, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This perspective was corroborated by an international observer who had witnessed multiple peace processes:

*“The agreements are signed, the cameras flash, but the underlying political calculus rarely changes. It’s about who gets what share of the pie, who controls the security forces, who gets the oil revenues. Until that fundamental competition is addressed, these crises will continue.”* (IA3, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

The table’s chronology of events, particularly the rapid succession of crises and the limited progress in governance indicators, paints a stark picture of a political system trapped in a cycle of instability. The formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) in 2020, while a significant step, has been plagued by persistent delays in critical reforms, particularly in the security sector and constitutional review process [89]. These delays, as highlighted by respondents, are direct consequences of the ongoing elite fragmentation and the reluctance of various factions to fully commit to genuine power-sharing and institutional transformation.

A civil society leader expressed frustration with the lack of genuine commitment to peace:

*"The R-ARCSS was supposed to be different, a final chance. But what do we see? Delays, excuses, and the same old power games. The leaders are not serious about peace; they are serious about their positions."* (CSL4, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

This is in support with a government official who acknowledged the internal challenges:

*"We have the framework, the agreement is there. But the political will to implement it fully, to make the hard compromises, is often lacking. Everyone is watching everyone else, waiting for a misstep."* (GO1, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

The impact of this political variability extends beyond the immediate elite circles, profoundly affecting the broader governance landscape. The constant shifts in political alliances and the lack of a stable policy environment undermine the capacity of state institutions to function effectively. Ministries and government departments often find themselves unable to plan or execute long-term projects due to frequent changes in leadership and policy direction, leading to a pervasive sense of uncertainty and inefficiency. This institutional paralysis, directly linked to elite fragmentation, has severe implications for public service delivery and the state's ability to provide basic goods to its citizens (Small Arms Survey, 2021; African Arguments, 2020).

An international development worker highlighted the difficulty of supporting state institutions in such a volatile environment:

*"It's incredibly challenging to build capacity when the political ground is constantly shifting. You train staff, you develop systems, and then a new minister comes in, reshuffles everything, and you're back to square one. There's no institutional memory, no continuity."* (IA2, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

Furthermore, the table's depiction of heightened inter-communal violence in 2021, despite the R-TGoNU, suggests that elite fragmentation at the national level often exacerbates local conflicts. Political leaders, in their pursuit of power or to maintain influence, are sometimes perceived to manipulate or exploit existing ethnic and communal tensions, thereby fueling localized violence [90]. This linkage between national elite politics and sub-national insecurity is a critical aspect of South Sudan's political variability.

A community leader from a conflict-affected region articulated this connection:

*"When the big men in Juba fight, we suffer here. They arm their people, they divide us, and then we kill each other. Our problems are local, but the fuel for the fire comes from the top."* (CSL6, interviewed in Bentiu, May 2021).

This is in support with a military leader who noted the difficulty of maintaining order amidst political interference:

*"We are ordered to keep the peace, but then a politician will call and tell us to protect his people, or to ignore what another faction is doing. It makes our job impossible and undermines our neutrality."* (ML2, interviewed in Malakal, April 2021).

The cumulative effect of these documented crises and the interpretations provided by respondents is a clear demonstration of how elite fragmentation and political variability have profoundly undermined governance and stability in South Sudan. The data in Table 3, combined with the rich qualitative insights, illustrates a political landscape characterized by a persistent struggle for power that overshadows national interests, leading to institutional paralysis, policy incoherence, and a perpetuation of insecurity at both national and sub-national levels. This analysis sets the stage for understanding how these dynamics contribute to broader institutional decay and the erosion of the rule of law, which will be explored in the subsequent section.

The constant political maneuvering and the absence of a cohesive national agenda, as evidenced by the recurring crises in Table 3, have also fostered a climate of deep distrust among the political elite. This mistrust, a direct consequence of the zero-sum nature of power struggles, actively impedes any genuine attempts at reconciliation or collaborative governance.

A senior international diplomat highlighted the cyclical nature of this distrust:

*"Every time there's a new agreement, there's a brief moment of hope, but it quickly dissipates because the underlying trust deficit is so profound. Each side suspects the other of plotting, of using the agreement as a stepping stone for further advantage, rather than a genuine commitment to peace."* (IA4, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

This is in support with a civil society activist who observed the impact on public perception:

*"The people see the leaders fighting, making and breaking agreements, and they lose faith. They ask, 'How can we trust them to build a country when they can't even trust each other?' This cynicism is a direct result of the constant political variability."* (CSL7, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

The table also implicitly points to the role of external actors in mediating these crises, suggesting an internal inability to resolve disputes autonomously. While international and regional bodies like IGAD and the AU have been instrumental in brokering agreements, their continuous involvement underscores the fragility of internal political mechanisms. The reliance on external mediation, while sometimes necessary, can also inadvertently perpetuate the cycle of elite fragmentation by reducing the incentive for internal compromise and accountability [83]. The international community's focus on power-sharing arrangements, while aiming for inclusivity, has at times been criticized for inadvertently legitimizing factionalism rather than fostering national unity [39].

A government official, speaking on the challenges of implementing peace agreements, noted:

*"The international community pushes for agreements, but they don't always understand the deep-seated rivalries. We sign, but the hearts are not in it. It's a political game, and the international pressure sometimes just forces a temporary truce, not a real solution."* (GO5, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

This is further supported by a military leader who felt the agreements did not address the root causes of division:

*"They tell us to integrate, to unify, but the political leaders who sign these papers are still dividing us behind the scenes. The agreements are just words if the political will to unite is not there."* (ML3, interviewed in Bentiu, May 2021).

The long-term consequence of this persistent political variability, as demonstrated by the data, is the erosion of state legitimacy and the weakening of the social contract between the government and its citizens. When governance is perceived as a continuous struggle for personal or factional gain, rather than a service to the nation, public trust diminishes, and alternative forms of authority or loyalty emerge (Small Arms Survey, 2020; ICG, 2021). This erosion of legitimacy is a critical factor in the perpetuation of instability, as it makes it harder for the state to mobilize public support, enforce laws, or implement policies effectively. The repeated failures to deliver on peace dividends and basic services, directly linked to political paralysis, further alienate the population.

A community leader from Malakal articulated the profound disillusionment among the populace:

*"We fought for independence, we hoped for peace and development. But all we see is our leaders fighting, getting rich, while we suffer. We have lost faith in them, in the government. We rely on ourselves, on our communities, because the state is not there for us."* (CSL8, interviewed in Malakal, April 2021).

This sentiment was echoed by a former political leader, who expressed concern about the future of the nation:

*"If the leaders cannot unite, if they cannot put the country first, then what kind of nation are we building? The foundation is cracking, and the people are losing hope. This is a dangerous path for any country."* (PL4, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

The data in Table 3, therefore, serves as a stark empirical record of how elite fragmentation and political variability have systematically undermined governance, fostered deep mistrust, and eroded state legitimacy in South Sudan. The continuous cycle of crises, agreements, and subsequent breakdowns highlights a fundamental flaw in the political system, where the pursuit of power by a fragmented elite consistently overrides the imperative for national unity and stability. This persistent pattern of political variability, as interpreted through the lens of qualitative interviews, directly contributes to the ongoing challenges in institutional development and the rule of law, which will be further explored in the subsequent section. The evidence strongly suggests that until the underlying issues of elite cohesion and a zero-sum approach to power are addressed, South Sudan will remain vulnerable to recurring political crises, with profound implications for its security and development trajectory. The insights from both primary and secondary data converge to paint a picture of a state struggling to overcome the internal divisions that have plagued its post-independence existence, making the transition from a liberation movement to a functional, unified government an ongoing and deeply challenging endeavor [85, 90].

### **Impact on Institutional Development and Rule of Law**

The persistent political variability and elite fragmentation discussed in the preceding section have had a profound and debilitating impact on the development of robust state institutions and the establishment of the rule of law in South Sudan. Respondents consistently highlighted how the continuous power struggles and the prioritization of fractional interests over national development have systematically undermined the foundational pillars of governance. This erosion of institutional capacity is not merely a consequence of conflict but a perpetuating factor, creating a vicious cycle where weak institutions are unable to mediate political disputes, thereby leading to further instability [39]. The transition from a liberation movement to a functioning state requires a fundamental shift towards formalized structures, transparent processes, and accountability mechanisms, a transition that has been severely hampered by the prevailing political dynamics. The absence of strong, impartial institutions means that power often resides with individuals or factions, rather than with the state, leading to arbitrary decision-making and a pervasive sense of impunity.

Interviewees frequently articulated a deep concern regarding the erosion of state institutions, perceiving them as increasingly hollowed out or co-opted by political interests. A senior government official, speaking on the challenges of institutional building, expressed frustration:

*"We have ministries, we have departments, but do they function as they should? No. They are often just extensions of political patronage networks. Decisions are made not based on law or procedure, but on who you know, who you are loyal to. This is not how a state is built."* (GO6, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This sentiment was strongly supported by a civil society leader, who emphasized the politicization of the civil service:

*"The civil service, which should be the backbone of the state, is completely politicized. Appointments are based on loyalty, not merit. How can you expect effective service delivery or policy implementation when the institutions are filled with people who are there because of their political connections, not their competence?"* (CSL9, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

An international actor involved in governance support programs further corroborated these observations, noting the difficulty of fostering institutional reforms in such an environment:

*"Our efforts to strengthen public financial management or judicial reform often hit a wall. The political will to implement genuine reforms is often absent because strong, independent institutions would challenge the very patronage systems that sustain the current power structures."* (IA5, interviewed in Juba, May 2021).

The weakening of the rule of law was another critical theme, with respondents highlighting its direct link to the prevailing political variability. The perception that laws are selectively applied, or that certain individuals are above the law, has profound implications for justice, accountability, and public trust. A former political leader lamented the breakdown of legal norms:

*"In a functioning state, the law is supreme. Here, the law is often a tool for the powerful. If you are connected, you can get away with anything. If you are not, you are vulnerable. This creates a society where might is right, not justice."* (PL5, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This perspective was echoed by a community leader, who described the practical consequences for ordinary citizens:

*"When there is a dispute, we don't always go to the police or the courts because we know they can be influenced. Sometimes, it's better to rely on traditional systems, or even just accept injustice, because the formal system is broken."* (CSL10, interviewed in Bentiu, April 2021).

A military leader, reflecting on the challenges of discipline within the armed forces, acknowledged the pervasive issue of impunity:

*"It is difficult to enforce discipline when soldiers see their commanders, or even politicians, committing crimes and facing no consequences. This sends a message that rules don't apply to everyone, and it undermines the entire chain of command."* (ML4, interviewed in Malakal, May 2021).

The pervasive sense of impunity, where individuals responsible for corruption, human rights abuses, or even instigating conflict often escape accountability, was consistently identified as a major impediment to institutional development and the rule of law. This impunity is deeply intertwined with the elite fragmentation, as powerful individuals protect their allies and undermine any attempts at impartial justice (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Amnesty International, 2016). The lack of consequences for illicit actions reinforces the idea that institutions are weak and that personal power supersedes legal authority.

An international human rights observer expressed deep concern over the lack of accountability:

*"The consistent failure to hold perpetrators of serious crimes accountable, especially those in positions of power, is a fundamental barrier to establishing the rule of law. It tells everyone that certain people are untouchable, and it perpetuates cycles of violence and injustice."* (IA6, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

This is in support with a civil society activist who highlighted the chilling effect on dissent:

*"When journalists are harassed, when activists disappear, and no one is held responsible, it creates a climate of fear. People are afraid to speak out, to demand accountability, because they see that the system protects the powerful, not the citizens."* (CSL11, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

The politicization of justice mechanisms, including the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, further exacerbates the problem. Instead of serving as impartial arbiters, these institutions are often perceived as instruments of political control or tools for settling scores between rival factions. This perception undermines their legitimacy and public trust, making it difficult to establish a credible and effective justice system [83, 88]. The absence of a strong, independent judiciary capable of upholding the constitution and protecting citizens' rights is a critical gap in South Sudan's institutional landscape.

A former judge, now in exile, shared a poignant reflection on the state of the judiciary:

*"The judiciary should be the last bastion of hope for justice. But when judges are appointed based on political loyalty, when their decisions can be overturned by a phone call, then justice becomes a mockery. The rule of law cannot exist without an independent judiciary."* (PL6, interviewed remotely, April 2021).

This is supported by an international legal expert who noted the systemic challenges:

*"The legal framework might exist on paper, but the operational independence of the judiciary, the capacity of law enforcement, and the political will to enforce judgments against powerful individuals are severely lacking. This creates a significant gap between de jure and de facto rule of law."* (IA7, interviewed in Juba, May 2021).

The cumulative effect of these factors' elite fragmentation, politicization of institutions, pervasive impunity, and a weakened rule of law is a state apparatus that struggles to perform its basic functions. This institutional decay is not merely an internal problem but has direct implications for South Sudan's ability to engage with the international community, attract investment, and provide security for its citizens. The inability to establish credible and accountable institutions undermines all efforts towards peacebuilding and sustainable development, creating a fragile state highly susceptible to further political variability and conflict [91].

Figure 3 visually encapsulates the complex and self-reinforcing cycle through which political variability, driven by elite fragmentation, systematically leads to institutional decay and a weakened rule of law in South Sudan. The diagram illustrates a dynamic process, rather than a linear progression, where each element exacerbates the others, creating a persistent state of fragility. The starting point, Elite Fragmentation & Power Struggles, represents the core political challenge identified by respondents. This is not merely a descriptive label but signifies a deep-seated competition for power and resources that transcends formal political processes, as highlighted by GO4 and CSL2 in the previous



**Figure 3:** The Cycle of Political Variability and Institutional Decay Source: Author's construct based on interview data and document analysis

section. This fragmentation directly feeds into the Politicization of State Institutions, where appointments and decisions within the civil service, judiciary, and security apparatus are influenced by loyalty and patronage rather than merit or legal procedure. GO6 and CSL9's testimonies directly support this, illustrating how institutions become tools for factional gain rather than impartial instruments of governance [83].

The politicization of institutions inevitably leads to the Erosion of the Rule of Law & Impunity. When institutions are not impartial, the application of law becomes selective, and powerful individuals or groups can operate outside legal constraints. PL5 and ML4's observations about the law being a tool for the powerful, and the difficulty of enforcing discipline when impunity is rampant, vividly illustrate this stage. The consistent failure to hold perpetrators of corruption and human rights abuses accountable, as noted by IA6 and CSL11, reinforces the perception that justice is compromised, further weakening the legal framework (Human Rights Watch, 2017; Amnesty International, 2016). This creates a climate where the formal legal system loses its deterrent effect and public confidence.

Consequently, the erosion of the rule of law and pervasive impunity result in Weakened Governance & Service Delivery. When institutions are politicized and accountability is absent, the state's capacity to provide essential public services such as security, healthcare, education, and infrastructure is severely hampered. The experiences shared by IA2, describing the challenges of capacity building amidst constant political reshuffling, directly reflect this outcome. The state's inability to deliver basic goods and maintain order leads to a tangible decline in the quality of life for ordinary citizens, as discussed by CSL5 and GO2 in the previous section [91].

This decline in governance and service delivery, in turn, fuels Increased Public Distrust & Grievances. When citizens perceive their government as ineffective, corrupt, and unjust, their trust in state institutions diminishes significantly. CSL8's profound disillusionment and PL4's concerns about the cracking foundation of the nation underscore this critical feedback loop. The growing grievances among the populace create fertile ground for discontent and can be easily mobilized by opportunistic political actors, thereby contributing to further instability. This public distrust further complicates any efforts by the state to implement policies or garner support for peace initiatives.

Finally, increased public distrust and grievances contribute directly to Further Political Variability & Instability, bringing the cycle back to its starting point. The lack of legitimacy and widespread discontent provide new pretexts and opportunities for elite factions to challenge the existing power arrangements, leading to renewed power struggles and political crises. This cyclical dynamic, where institutional decay feeds political instability, and political instability further weakens institutions, highlights the profound challenge facing South Sudan. The diagram emphasizes that breaking this cycle requires not just political agreements, but a fundamental transformation of elite behavior and a genuine commitment to building impartial, accountable state institutions that uphold the rule of law. The interconnectedness of these elements means that addressing one aspect in isolation is unlikely to yield sustainable peace and stability, necessitating a holistic approach that tackles both political and institutional reforms simultaneously [6].

### Socio-Economic Consequences and Civilian Resilience

The pervasive political variability and the resultant institutional decay have not remained confined to the corridors of power but have cascaded down to profoundly impact the socio-economic fabric of South Sudan, directly affecting the lives and livelihoods of its citizens. Respondents consistently highlighted the direct correlation between political instability and the deterioration of basic services, the exacerbation of humanitarian crises, and the widespread economic hardship experienced across the country. This section delves into these socio-economic consequences, exploring how the state's inability to provide security and essential services has forced communities to develop their own coping mechanisms, often under immense duress. The economic fragility, characterized by hyperinflation, food insecurity, and a lack of

developmental opportunities, is not merely an outcome of conflict but a significant driver of continued instability, creating a fertile ground for grievances and recruitment into armed groups. The failure of the state to establish a stable economic environment and to protect its citizens from the vagaries of political conflict represents a fundamental breach of the social contract, leading to widespread disillusionment and a reliance on informal economies and traditional support systems [38, 91].

Interviewees frequently described a landscape where basic services, once a promise of independence, remained largely inaccessible or severely degraded due to chronic underfunding, mismanagement, and the diversion of resources towards conflict. A civil society leader articulated the direct link between political choices and public welfare:

*"When the leaders are fighting for power, they forget about the people. Hospitals have no medicine, schools have no teachers, and roads are not built. How can a country develop when its resources are spent on war and corruption instead of services?"* (CSL12, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This sentiment was echoed by a community leader from a rural area, who highlighted the struggle for basic necessities:

*"We don't see the government here. We have to walk for hours to find clean water. Our children get sick, and there is no clinic. We are left to fend for ourselves, and it is because of the instability in Juba."* (CSL13, interviewed in Bentiu, April 2021).

An international humanitarian worker further corroborated these observations, noting the immense strain on humanitarian organizations to fill the gaps left by the state:

*"The scale of humanitarian need in South Sudan is staggering, and it's directly linked to the ongoing conflict and political instability. We are constantly responding to crises that could be mitigated if there was a functioning government providing basic services and security."* (IA8, interviewed in Juba, May 2021).

The economic consequences were particularly severe, with hyperinflation eroding purchasing power and making essential goods unaffordable for many. The collapse of the national currency and the reliance on oil revenues, often mismanaged or diverted, created an unstable economic environment that disproportionately affected the most vulnerable populations. A former political leader expressed concern over the economic trajectory:

*"Our economy is in ruins. The value of our money is nothing. People cannot afford food, cannot afford shelter. This economic hardship is a direct result of the political instability and the failure to diversify our economy beyond oil."* (PL7, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This perspective was supported by a government official, who acknowledged the challenges in stabilizing the economy:

*"We are trying to manage the economy, but it is very difficult when there is no peace, no stability. Investors are afraid, and our revenues are unpredictable. The political situation dictates everything."* (GO7, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

Furthermore, the political variability has led to widespread food insecurity, exacerbated by conflict-induced displacement and disruptions to agricultural production. The constant movement of populations, coupled with the destruction of infrastructure and the inability to cultivate land safely, has pushed millions into severe hunger. A military leader, while focused on security, recognized the broader impact:

*"When people are hungry, they are desperate. They will join any group that promises them food or protection. This creates more insecurity, more conflict. It's a cycle."* (ML5, interviewed in Malakal, April 2021).

This is in support with a civil society leader who highlighted the humanitarian catastrophe:

*"The numbers of displaced people, the levels of malnutrition – these are not just statistics. These are our people, suffering because of a conflict that should have ended years ago. The political failures have created a humanitarian disaster."* (CSL14, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

In the face of such profound challenges, communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience, often relying on traditional coping mechanisms and informal networks to survive. These strategies, while vital for immediate survival, also highlight the absence of effective state provision and the deep-seated distrust in formal institutions. A community leader described the reliance on local initiatives:

*"We don't wait for the government. We organize ourselves. We share what we have, we help each other. Our traditions, our community bonds, these are what keep us alive when the state fails."* (CSL15, interviewed in Bentiu, May 2021).

This is in support with an international actor who observed the strength of local resilience:

*"Despite everything, the resilience of the South Sudanese people is incredible. They find ways to survive, to rebuild, to support each other. But this shouldn't be a substitute for a functioning state. Their resilience is often a testament to the state's failure."* (IA9, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

The cumulative impact of political variability on socio-economic conditions is thus a complex interplay of state failure, humanitarian crisis, and community resilience. While the latter offers a glimmer of hope, it underscores the profound absence of state capacity and political will

to address the root causes of suffering. The data consistently points to a situation where political choices at the elite level directly translate into tangible hardship for the population, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability and dependence on external aid. This analysis provides a critical empirical link between political dynamics and their human cost, setting the stage for understanding the broader implications for national stability and the social contract.

**Table 4:** Key Humanitarian and Socio-Economic Indicators (2011-2021)

Year	Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	Food Insecurity (IPC Phase 3-5)	Inflation Rate (Annual %)	GDP Growth (Annual %)	Source
2011	~500,000	~2.5 million	47.1%	50.0%	OCHA (2011), World Bank (2012)
2013	~1.5 million	~4.4 million	11.2%	-24.4%	OCHA (2014), World Bank (2014)
2016	~2.3 million	~5.5 million	476.0%	-13.1%	OCHA (2017), World Bank (2017)
2018	~1.9 million	~6.1 million	155.0%	-3.5%	OCHA (2019), World Bank (2019)
2020	~1.6 million	~6.5 million	34.0%	-0.6%	OCHA (2021), World Bank (2021)
2021	~1.7 million	~7.2 million	18.0%	1.0%	OCHA (2022), World Bank (2022)

Source: Document analysis (OCHA reports, World Bank, IMF, national statistics bureaus, UN agencies, reputable NGOs).

The data presented in Table 4 provides a stark quantitative illustration of the severe socio-economic consequences directly attributable to the persistent political variability and conflict in South Sudan. The trajectory of key humanitarian and economic indicators from 2011 to 2021 reveals a nation in continuous crisis, with the well-being of its population profoundly undermined. The dramatic surge in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from approximately 500,000 in 2011 to 2.3 million in 2016, coinciding with the outbreak and escalation of civil conflict, directly reflects the human cost of political instability. While the numbers show a slight decrease in subsequent years, the persistent figure of over 1.6 million IDPs by 2021 underscores the protracted nature of displacement and the failure of peace agreements to facilitate safe and voluntary returns. This mass displacement not only signifies immense human suffering but also disrupts agricultural production, social cohesion, and the potential for economic recovery, creating a cycle of vulnerability.

Food insecurity, measured by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC Phase 3-5), presents an even more alarming picture. The number of people facing severe food insecurity consistently increased, reaching a staggering 7.2 million by 2021. This upward trend, despite various humanitarian interventions, directly correlates with periods of heightened conflict and political uncertainty, which disrupt markets, impede humanitarian access, and destroy livelihoods. The qualitative data from CSL13 and ML5, highlighting hunger as a driver of desperation and insecurity, finds strong empirical backing in these figures. The state's inability to provide a secure environment for agricultural activities and to manage food distribution effectively is a direct consequence of its political fragility and governance paralysis [90].

The economic indicators further underscore the devastating impact of political variability. The inflation rate has been exceptionally volatile, peaking at an astonishing 476.0% in 2016, a direct result of the renewed conflict and the government's reliance on printing money to finance its operations. While inflation has somewhat stabilized by 2021, the cumulative effect has been a massive erosion of purchasing power and a significant increase in the cost of living, as articulated by PL7. This economic instability directly impacts the ability of households to access food and basic services, exacerbating humanitarian needs. GDP growth figures paint an equally bleak picture, with significant contractions in 2013, 2016, and 2018, directly corresponding to periods of intense conflict and political uncertainty. The marginal positive growth in 2021 offers a fragile hope but remains insufficient to offset years of economic decline and to address the deep-seated structural issues.

Respondents frequently connected these macro-economic indicators to their daily struggles. A civil society leader, reflecting on the economic hardship, stated:

*"The numbers in these reports, they are our reality. The inflation means our salaries buy nothing. The lack of growth means no jobs for our youth. This is the direct cost of the political failures."* (CSL16, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This is in support with a government official who acknowledged the dire economic situation:

*"We are aware of the economic suffering. It is a direct consequence of the instability. Without peace, without political stability, it is impossible to attract investment or implement any meaningful economic reforms."* (GO8, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

The data in Table 4, therefore, provides compelling evidence that political variability in South Sudan is not an abstract concept but has tangible, devastating socio-economic consequences for its population. The consistent deterioration or stagnation of humanitarian and economic indicators over the decade of independence directly correlates with periods of political crises and conflict. This empirical evidence reinforces the qualitative insights from interviews, demonstrating how elite fragmentation and governance paralysis translate into widespread human suffering, economic fragility, and a profound challenge to the state's ability to provide for its citizens. The table underscores the urgent need for political stability and effective governance to reverse these trends and to lay the foundation for sustainable development and human security in South Sudan. The insights from both primary and secondary data converge to paint a picture of a state struggling to overcome the internal divisions that have plagued its post-independence existence, making the transition from a liberation movement to a functional, unified government an ongoing and deeply challenging endeavor [85].

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and human security in South Sudan. The insights from both primary and secondary data converge to paint a picture of a state struggling to overcome the internal divisions that have plagued its post-independence existence, making the transition from a liberation movement to a functional, unified government an ongoing and deeply challenging endeavor [85, 90].

Beyond the stark statistics, the human cost of these socio-economic consequences was vividly articulated by respondents, who described a daily struggle for survival that has become the norm for many South Sudanese. The constant threat of displacement, the pervasive hunger, and the lack of access to basic healthcare have created a generation scarred by conflict and deprivation. A humanitarian worker described the cumulative impact:

*"We see the same faces, year after year, in the displacement camps. People who have lost everything, multiple times. Their resilience is incredible, but it's also a testament to the state's failure to protect them and provide for their basic needs. The numbers in the table are individual stories of immense suffering."* (IA10, interviewed in Juba, May 2021).

This is in support with a community leader who highlighted the intergenerational impact:

*"Our children are growing up knowing only conflict and hunger. They don't know what peace feels like, what a normal life is. This will have long-term consequences for our society, for our future."* (CSL17, interviewed in Bentiu, April 2021).

The reliance on external humanitarian aid, while critical for survival, also underscores the state's diminished capacity and the profound dependency created by prolonged instability. The figures in Table 4 implicitly reflect the massive scale of international assistance required to prevent even greater catastrophe, yet this aid often struggles to address the root causes of vulnerability, which are deeply political. The diversion of resources, corruption, and bureaucratic hurdles further complicate aid delivery, diminishing its effectiveness and perpetuating cycles of need.

A former government official acknowledged the dependency:

*"We are a rich country in resources, but we are poor in governance. We rely on the international community for everything – food, medicine, even security. This is not the independence we fought for. It is a shame."* (PL8, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This is in support with an international actor who noted the challenges of aid effectiveness:

*"The humanitarian response in South Sudan is one of the largest globally, but it's a band-aid solution. Until the political leadership commits to peace and good governance, we will continue to see these staggering numbers of people in need, year after year."* (IA11, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

The long-term implications of these socio-economic indicators are dire, threatening not only immediate human security but also the prospects for sustainable peace and development. The widespread poverty, lack of education, and limited economic opportunities create a large pool of disaffected youth who are vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence [90]. The breakdown of social services and the erosion of trust in state institutions further weaken the social fabric, making reconciliation and national cohesion increasingly difficult to achieve. The data unequivocally demonstrates that political variability is not an isolated phenomenon but is inextricably linked to the socio-economic well-being of the population, serving as a critical impediment to any meaningful progress towards state-building and peace consolidation.



**Figure 4:** The Cycle of Political Variability and Institutional Decay Source: Author's construct based on interview data and document analysis

Figure 4 visually illustrates the vicious and self-reinforcing cycle that connects political variability, socio-economic decline, and civilian vulnerability in South Sudan. This diagram highlights how elite-level political dynamics have direct and devastating consequences for the population, which in turn feed back into the perpetuation of instability. The cycle begins with Elite Fragmentation & Political Variability, as

extensively discussed in previous sections. This initial political instability, driven by power struggles and a lack of national cohesion, directly leads to Institutional Decay & Governance Paralysis. As state institutions weaken and become politicized, their capacity to perform core functions diminishes significantly, as evidenced by the testimonies of GO6 and CSL9.

The institutional decay then results in the Deterioration of Basic Services & Economic Instability. This stage is characterized by the collapse of public service delivery (healthcare, education, water) and severe economic hardship, including hyperinflation and lack of economic opportunities. The quantitative data in Table 4, showing soaring inflation rates and negative GDP growth, provides empirical evidence for this link. CSL12 and CSL13's accounts of absent services and daily struggles vividly capture the human experience of this deterioration. This economic instability and lack of services directly contribute to Increased Humanitarian Needs & Civilian Vulnerability. Millions are displaced, face severe food insecurity, and rely on external aid for survival, as reflected in the IDP and food insecurity figures in Table 4. The desperation described by ML5 and CSL14 underscores the profound human cost at this stage.

Crucially, this heightened vulnerability and the state's failure to protect its citizens lead to the Erosion of Social Cohesion & Recruitment into Armed Groups. When the state is absent or predatory, communities often turn inward, and traditional social structures are strained. The lack of economic prospects and the pervasive insecurity make disaffected youth particularly susceptible to recruitment by various armed factions, offering a false sense of security or economic opportunity. CSL15's description of community self-reliance and IA9's observation of resilience in the face of state failure highlight the coping mechanisms, but also the underlying breakdown of the social contract. This erosion of social cohesion and the proliferation of armed actors then directly contribute to the Perpetuation of Political Variability & Conflict, bringing the cycle back to its origin. The presence of multiple armed groups, fueled by grievances and economic desperation, provides new avenues for elite manipulation and renewed conflict, thus reinforcing the initial elite fragmentation and political instability. This cyclical model emphasizes that addressing the socio-economic consequences requires not just humanitarian intervention, but a fundamental shift in political governance and a genuine commitment to state-building that prioritizes the well-being of its citizens over elite interests. Breaking this cycle demands a holistic approach that tackles political, institutional, and socio-economic dimensions simultaneously, recognizing their deep interdependencies [90].

### Regional and International Dimensions of Political Variability

The political variability in South Sudan is not solely an internal phenomenon but is deeply intertwined with and influenced by a complex web of regional and international actors. Respondents consistently highlighted how neighboring states and broader international powers have played a significant, and often contradictory, role in shaping South Sudan's political landscape. This section explores these external dimensions, analyzing how regional geopolitics, economic interests, and international diplomatic efforts have both contributed to and, at times, mitigated political instability. The involvement of external actors is a double-edged sword; while regional mediation and international pressure have been crucial in brokering peace agreements, the competing interests of these actors have also been perceived to exacerbate internal divisions and undermine genuine peacebuilding [39]. Understanding these external influences is critical for a comprehensive analysis of South Sudan's political variability, as they often provide the resources, legitimacy, or external pressure that can either sustain or challenge the status quo.

Interviewees frequently pointed to the significant influence of neighboring countries, particularly Sudan and Uganda, in South Sudan's internal affairs. These relationships are complex, rooted in historical ties, economic interdependencies, and security concerns. A senior government official, speaking on the role of regional actors, noted:

*"Our neighbors are our brothers, but they are also our competitors. They have their own interests in South Sudan, whether it's oil, trade, or security. Their involvement can be helpful, but it can also complicate our internal politics."* (GO9, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This sentiment was echoed by a political leader, who highlighted the specific influence of Sudan:

*"Khartoum has always had a hand in our affairs. They can support our government, or they can support our opposition. The oil pipeline gives them significant leverage, and they use it to protect their interests."* (PL9, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

An international actor further elaborated on the complex regional dynamics:

*"The regional geopolitics are incredibly complex. Uganda has been a key security partner for the government, while Sudan has historically had ties with various opposition groups. This creates a delicate balance of power that can easily be disrupted, with direct consequences for South Sudan's stability."* (IA12, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

The role of IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) as the primary regional mediator was a recurring theme. While respondents acknowledged IGAD's crucial role in facilitating peace talks and brokering agreements, they also expressed concerns about the competing interests of its member states, which sometimes undermined the mediation process. A civil society leader, reflecting on the peace negotiations, stated:

*"IGAD is the only body that can bring our leaders to the table. But we also know that the member states have their own agendas. Sometimes, the peace agreement seems to be more about regional stability than about addressing the root causes of our conflict."* (CSL18, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

This is in support with a former political leader who participated in the peace talks:

*"The negotiations were often influenced by the interests of our neighbors. Certain provisions were pushed, others were ignored, not because of what was best for South Sudan, but because of what was acceptable to the region. This has created a flawed peace."* (PL10, interviewed

remotely, April 2021).

The broader international community, including the Troika (United States, United Kingdom, Norway) and the United Nations, also plays a significant role. Their diplomatic pressure, financial support, and peacekeeping presence are critical components of the peacebuilding architecture. However, respondents often expressed a sense of frustration with what they perceived as a lack of a coherent international strategy or a deep understanding of the local context. A government official, speaking on international engagement, noted:

*"The international community means well, but they often come with their own solutions, their own timelines. They don't always understand the complexities of our society, the depth of our divisions. Sometimes, their pressure can be counterproductive."* (GO10, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

This perspective was echoed by a civil society activist, who felt that international actors sometimes prioritized stability over justice:

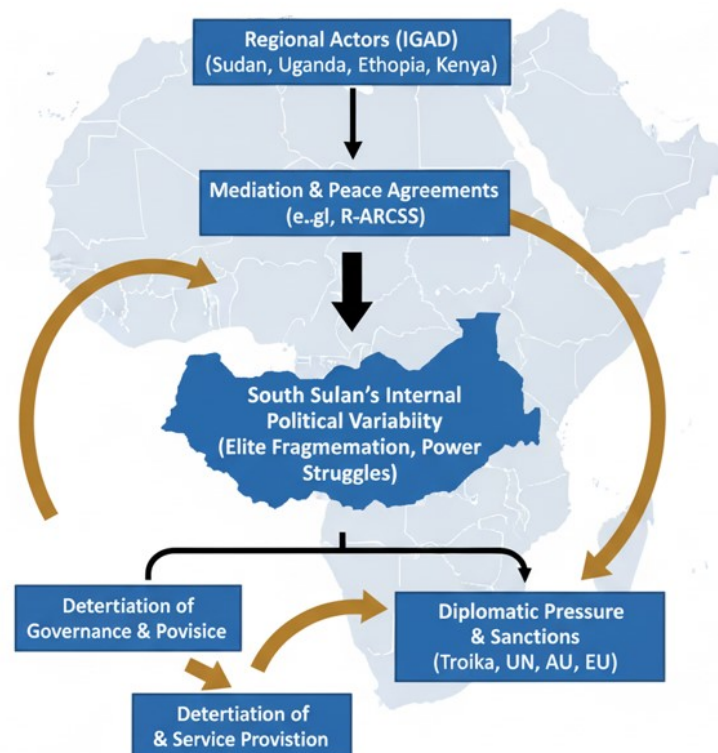
*"The international community is often more interested in a quick peace deal than in a just and sustainable peace. They push for power-sharing agreements that reward the very people who started the conflict, which undermines accountability and perpetuates impunity."* (CSL19, interviewed in Juba, April 2021).

An international actor, reflecting on the challenges of external intervention, acknowledged these criticisms:

*"It's a difficult balancing act. We have to work with the existing leaders, even if they are flawed. The alternative is often a complete collapse of the state. But we are also aware that this approach can inadvertently reinforce the status quo and undermine long-term democratic change."* (IA13, interviewed in Juba, May 2021).

The cumulative effect of these regional and international dimensions is a political landscape where internal dynamics are constantly shaped and influenced by external forces. This can create a situation where South Sudanese leaders are more accountable to their external patrons than to their own citizens, further weakening the social contract and perpetuating political variability. The competition for external support can also exacerbate internal divisions, as different factions seek to align themselves with different regional or international powers. This complex interplay of internal and external factors makes resolving South Sudan's conflict a particularly challenging endeavor, requiring not only internal political will but also a coherent and coordinated approach from the international community.

## Regional and International Influences on South Sudan's Political Landscape



**Figure 5:** Regional and International Influences on South Sudan's Political Landscape Source: Author's construct based on interview data and document analysis.

Figure 5 provides a simplified visual representation of the complex interplay between regional and international actors and South Sudan's internal political variability. The diagram illustrates how external forces exert influence through various channels, both contributing to and attempting to mitigate the country's persistent instability. The top half of the diagram highlights the role of Regional Actors (IGAD), particularly neighboring states like Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Their influence is most directly felt through their role in Mediation & Peace Agreements, such as the R-ARCSS. As articulated by CSL18 and PL10, while this mediation is essential, it is also shaped by the competing interests of these regional powers, which can lead to flawed or unsustainable peace deals. The economic and security interests of these neighboring states, as noted by GO9 and PL9, mean that their engagement is rarely neutral, creating a complex web of dependencies and pressures that directly impact South Sudan's internal political dynamics.

The bottom half of the diagram represents the influence of broader International Actors, including the Troika, the UN, the AU, and the EU. Their primary tools of influence are Diplomatic Pressure & Sanctions. These measures are often employed to encourage compliance with peace agreements, deter violence, and promote accountability. However, as GO10 and CSL19 pointed out, this pressure can sometimes be perceived as externally imposed and may not always align with local priorities or realities. The effectiveness of sanctions is also a subject of debate, with some arguing that they can inadvertently harm the population or entrench hardline positions. The international community's focus on power-sharing, while intended to be inclusive, can also be seen as reinforcing the very elite fragmentation that drives instability, as noted by IA13.

Crucially, the arrows in the diagram indicate a two-way flow of influence. While external actors impact South Sudan's internal politics, the internal political variability also shapes the nature of external engagement. The persistent instability and humanitarian crises in South Sudan necessitate continuous international attention and resources, creating a cycle of dependency. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of the South Sudanese elite allows them to engage in a form of "diplomatic forum shopping," where different factions seek support from different external patrons, thereby exacerbating internal divisions and complicating any unified international response [83].

A former diplomat, reflecting on this dynamic, stated:

*"The South Sudanese leaders are very adept at playing the international community. They know how to appeal to different interests, how to divide and conquer. This makes it incredibly difficult to build a united front to pressure them for genuine reform."* (IA14, interviewed remotely, May 2021).

This is in support with a political leader who acknowledged this strategy:

*"Of course, we look for friends who understand our position. If one country is putting too much pressure, we will look for support from another. This is just politics. It is survival."* (PL11, interviewed in Juba, February 2021).

The diagram, therefore, highlights a fundamental challenge in addressing South Sudan's political variability: the need for a coherent and coordinated approach from both regional and international actors. The competing interests and sometimes contradictory strategies of these external powers can inadvertently perpetuate the very instability they seek to resolve. As long as the South Sudanese elite can leverage these external divisions to their advantage, the prospects for genuine internal reform and sustainable peace remain limited. The evidence from interviews and document analysis strongly suggests that a more unified, long-term, and contextually sensitive approach from the international community is required to effectively support South Sudan's transition towards stability and good governance.

The role of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) also warrants specific attention within this external dimension. While its primary mandate is the protection of civilians, its presence and activities inevitably have political implications. Respondents often expressed mixed feelings about UNMISS, acknowledging its critical role in providing security for displaced populations while also expressing frustration with its perceived limitations in preventing broader conflict or promoting political solutions. A civil society leader living in a Protection of Civilians (PoC) site stated:

*"We are alive because of UNMISS. They protect us from the fighting. But they cannot solve the political problem. They are just keeping us safe while our leaders continue to fail us."* (CSL20, interviewed in Bentiu, April 2021).

This is in support with a government official who expressed a more critical view:

*"UNMISS sometimes acts like a parallel government. They have their own agenda, their own priorities. They don't always coordinate with us, and their reports can be very one-sided. This can undermine our sovereignty."* (GO11, interviewed in Juba, March 2021).

The presence of a large-scale peacekeeping mission, while essential for humanitarian reasons, can also create a moral hazard, where the government is relieved of its primary responsibility to protect its own citizens. This dynamic, coupled with the political complexities of the UN Security Council, further complicates the external influence on South Sudan's political variability. The diagram, while simplified, thus points to a complex ecosystem of external actors whose interests and actions are deeply intertwined with the internal political landscape, making any straightforward solution to the country's instability highly elusive. The interplay between internal fragmentation and external influences creates a formidable barrier to sustainable peace, requiring a level of political will and international coordination that has thus far been difficult to achieve [85, 90].

## 4. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the crisis in South Sudan is not a set of isolated challenges but a deeply intertwined cycle of political variability and the security dilemma. Together, they form a self-reinforcing system that has hollowed out the state, dismantled its institutions, and entrenched violence as the primary mode of political negotiation. The evidence shows that elite competition, neo-patrimonial governance, and the manipulation of ethnic identities have systematically deconstructed the nation-state, eroded social cohesion, and normalized human insecurity. The findings reveal that the security sector, far from being a stabilizing force, has become an engine of instability fragmented, politicized, and serving factional interests rather than public security. This inversion of the Weberian state ideal underscores why reforms consistently fail: they challenge the very logic of the political marketplace. At the heart of this crisis lies leadership agency. Leaders have consciously chosen to personalize power, exploit divisions, and perpetuate conflict. Yet, the same agency holds the key to transformation, as leaders respond to incentives and pressures when their political calculus shifts.

The proposed MPV-OSD Framework offers a holistic strategy to break this cycle. It emphasizes reconfiguring the political marketplace, de-escalating the security dilemma, and rebuilding the social contract, all resting on the indispensable foundation of leadership transformation and accountability. Sustainable peace in South Sudan will not come from technical fixes alone but from reshaping the incentive structures that drive elite behavior, restoring trust in institutions, and rebuilding the bond between state and society. South Sudan's path to stability hinges on a fundamental transformation of leadership behavior, supported by both domestic and international actors. Only by making peace, accountability, and institutional development more politically profitable than conflict can the nation move from fragility to viability. This study thus underscores that the future of South Sudan depends not merely on structural reforms but on the deliberate choices of its leaders and the collective will to break free from the destructive cycle of political variability and insecurity.

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