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Understanding the Key Contributing Factors of Political Predominance and Political Parties' Decision-Making in South Sudan

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Abstract: This paper examines the key factors contributing to political dominance in post-conflict South Sudan, focusing on the decision-making processes within political parties. South Sudan's political landscape has been shaped by liberation-era legacies, ethnic allegiances, and weak institutional structures, resulting in a fragile governance environment. The study identifies elite bargaining, patronage networks, institutional manipulation, and the dominance of the security sector as core elements reinforcing the political supremacy of ruling elites, particularly the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Drawing parallels from other African contexts—such as Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF and Ethiopia's former EPRDF—the paper illustrates how liberation movements often consolidate power through similar mechanisms, including the co-optation of opposition and control over state resources. Literature reviewed indicates that factors such as resource monopolization, external peace negotiations, and fragmented opposition have further entrenched ruling party dominance in South Sudan. To advance democratic governance, the paper recommends strengthening independent electoral institutions, promoting inclusive political participation, reforming the security sector, and enhancing transparency in resource distribution. The paper is structured into four main sections: an introduction, background on South Sudan's political setting, analysis, and concluding recommendations for policy reform.

Keywords: Political, Dominance, Decision making, political parties.

INTRODUCTION

Political dominance in South Sudan is shaped by a combination of historical legacies, ethnic alliances, militarized governance, and weak institutional frameworks (Lindberg, 2006; Sisk, 2008). Since independence in 2011, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) has remained the dominant force, leveraging its liberation credentials and control over state apparatuses. The centralization of power around political elites—often drawn along ethnic lines—has resulted in exclusionary politics, undermining democratic decision-making within parties. This trend mirrors patterns in several African countries, such as Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, where liberation movements transformed into dominant parties. In Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF's continued rule has been sustained by patronage networks and repression, while in Ethiopia, the TPLF-dominated EPRDF controlled decision-making for decades through ethnic federalism and security dominance. Similarly, in South Sudan, the SPLM's dominance is reinforced by personalized rule, lack of internal party democracy, and reliance on military power rather than consensus or institutional checks. These factors hinder inclusive governance and fuel political instability, as seen during the SPLM's internal power struggles leading to the 2013 and 2016 civil conflicts.

In South Sudan, a nation that gained independence in 2011 following decades of conflict, the role of political parties in consolidating power has been crucial (Johnson, 2016). The nature of political dominance in South Sudan is deeply intertwined with the country's post-conflict transition, characterized by fragile governance structures, power-sharing agreements, and ongoing peace processes (International Crisis Group, 2019; Rolandsen, 2015). Understanding the key factors influencing political dominance provides insight into the broader democratization challenges and the effectiveness of political parties in stabilizing or destabilizing the nation (de Waal, 2014).

This paper explores the underlying drivers of political predominance among South Sudanese political parties and their impact on governance, stability, and democratic consolidation. Strengthening party institutionalization and promoting internal democratic norms are thus crucial for sustainable peace and political pluralism.

The South Sudan's Political Setting

South Sudan's political landscape is complex and shaped by a history of armed struggle, ethnic divisions, and external influences (Jok, 2011; Rolandsen, 2015). Following its independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan initially embraced a government dominated by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) (Johnson, 2016). However, political fragmentation, internal power struggles, and the outbreak of civil war in 2013 created a deeply polarized environment (de Waal, 2014). The 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement sought to address these conflicts by

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establishing a power-sharing arrangement among key political factions, including the SPLM-In Government (SPLM-IG), SPLM-In Opposition (SPLM-IO), and other smaller parties (International Crisis Group, 2019). Despite these efforts, political dominance remains a contentious issue, often dictated by elite bargains, resource control, and external mediation efforts (Schomerus & Aalen, 2016). The decision-making structures within these parties play a significant role in shaping governance policies, electoral processes, and the overall trajectory of democratic development in South Sudan (Santoro, 2021). A review of existing literature on political dominance in post-conflict states provides a critical framework for understanding South Sudan's political landscape. Post-conflict environments often present opportunities for both democratic reform and authoritarian consolidation. In South Sudan, political dominance has been influenced by elite pacts, ethnic alignments, fragile institutions, and external intervention. These elements, deeply rooted in the country's political evolution and violent past, continue to shape governance and political competition today.

Elite Bargaining and Power-Sharing Agreements

According to Arriola (2013), elite cohesion and political bargaining are central to maintaining dominance in fragile states. The Revitalized Peace Agreement in South Sudan reflects these principles by distributing power among key political actors to prevent renewed conflict (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Elite bargaining and power-sharing agreements are foundational mechanisms in the stabilization of post-conflict states. Arriola (2013) emphasizes that elite cohesion—where key actors from opposing factions negotiate and cooperate—can reduce the risk of renewed conflict. In South Sudan, the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) serves as a prime example of this approach. The agreement aimed to end years of civil war by restructuring power among rival leaders, including President Salva Kiir and opposition leader Riek Machar. According to the International Crisis Group (2019), this framework of inclusive governance has temporarily quelled armed confrontations but has not addressed deeper political grievances. Elite bargains often prioritize short-term stability over long-term democratic development, entrenching a political status quo that benefits incumbent leaders. Moreover, the absence of accountability mechanisms within these arrangements allows elite actors to operate with impunity. As seen in South Sudan, power-sharing becomes less about institutionalizing peace and more about dividing spoils among elites. This approach risks excluding civil society and grassroots movements, thereby limiting broader political participation and reinforcing elite dominance.

Ethnic and Identity Politics

Horowitz (1985) highlights the central role of ethnicity in shaping political loyalties within deeply divided societies. In the context of South Sudan, political competition frequently follows ethnic lines, contributing to persistent patterns of marginalization and dominance (Jok, 2011).

In many post-conflict nations, ethnic identity often serves as a key driver of political action. Rather than uniting around shared ideologies or policy goals, communities tend to align politically based on ethnic affiliation, a phenomenon well-documented by Horowitz (1985). South Sudan mirrors this trend, with political and military groups often deriving their support from specific ethnic constituencies—most notably the Dinka and Nuer. This pattern was evident during the civil war and has continued in the post-war political landscape.

According to Jok (2011), political elites have leveraged ethnic loyalty not just to gain support, but also to weaken or exclude their rivals. This approach fuels a perception of politics as a winner-takes-all contest, where state power and resources are seen as entitlements of one group rather than a national trust. Such tactics deepen societal divisions and make genuine reconciliation efforts more difficult. When ethnic groups see political dominance by others as a threat to their own survival, the result is often recurring cycles of conflict.

These entrenched ethnic dynamics continue to obstruct peacebuilding in South Sudan, complicating efforts toward constitutional reform, inclusive governance, and the development of a cohesive national identity.

Institutional Weakness and Governance Challenges

Bratton and van de Walle (1997) suggest that weak institutions allow ruling parties to entrench power through patronage and coercion. In South Sudan, the lack of strong democratic institutions enables dominant parties to manipulate electoral processes and suppress opposition voices (de Waal, 2014).

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The capacity of political institutions plays a crucial role in either curbing or enabling political dominance. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) argue that in weak institutional environments, ruling parties can entrench themselves through patronage, coercion, and manipulation. South Sudan's state institutions remain fragile, under-resourced, and often subordinate to political and military elites. The judiciary lacks independence, the electoral commission is widely perceived as biased, and the legislature is dominated by the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). These conditions have allowed the executive branch to centralize authority, suppress dissent, and delay democratic reforms. De Waal (2014) notes that governance in South Sudan operates more through informal networks and personal loyalty than formal rule of law. Corruption, nepotism, and clientelism are pervasive, with public offices often used to reward political allies. This undermines state legitimacy and creates a political environment where opposition parties struggle to compete fairly. Institutional weakness not only facilitates dominance by incumbent leaders but also erodes public trust in government. Without institutional checks and balances, the prospects for democratic transition remain bleak.

External Influence and Mediation

Paris (2004) highlights the role of international actors in post-conflict state-building. In South Sudan, regional organizations such as IGAD and global powers have played a role in shaping political decisions, often reinforcing dominant factions (Schomerus & Aalen, 2016). International actors have played a significant role in shaping political outcomes in South Sudan, often with mixed results. Paris (2004) underscores the importance of international involvement in post-conflict reconstruction, arguing that external mediation can help stabilize fragile states. However, in South Sudan, such interventions have at times reinforced existing power imbalances. Organizations like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and key global powers, including the United States and China, have facilitated peace negotiations and provided humanitarian aid. While their involvement has helped prevent total state collapse, it has also legitimized dominant political actors. Schomerus and Aalen (2016) argue that international donors often prioritize stability over democracy, thereby entrenching authoritarian practices. For instance, the R-ARCSS was brokered with heavy international involvement, but it preserved the positions of elite actors without ensuring accountability or inclusive governance. Additionally, external aid and peacekeeping missions sometimes operate in ways that shield the government from domestic pressure, reducing incentives for reform. The reliance on external mediation, while valuable in the short term, risks undermining local ownership of peace processes and may delay the development of sustainable political institutions.

CONCLUSION

South Sudan's political landscape remains deeply shaped by post-conflict dynamics, elite bargains, and the legacy of militarized governance. Political dominance, particularly by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Government (SPLM-IG), has been reinforced through patronage networks, institutional manipulation, and international legitimization. While temporary stability has been achieved, it has come at the cost of democratic development, inclusive governance, and institutional accountability. To move towards a more democratic, stable, and representative political order, a multi-faceted approach is required. Below is key policy conclusion aimed at dismantling structures of dominance and fostering political transformation in South Sudan.

Strengthening Electoral and Governance Institutions

A cornerstone of democratic consolidation is the establishment of credible, independent institutions. South Sudan's political system currently suffers from the dominance of executive power, with electoral and judicial bodies lacking autonomy. To mitigate this, an independent electoral commission must be constituted with full legal and financial independence to organize, oversee, and enforce fair electoral practices. In parallel, strengthening the judiciary is vital to ensuring impartial interpretation and enforcement of constitutional and electoral laws.

Bratton and van de Walle (1997) emphasize that democratic institutions act as counterweights to dominant political actors. For this reason, institutional reforms must also include legislative capacity building, ensuring that parliament can function as a check on executive overreach. These reforms would create a more balanced political playing field and restore public confidence in governance.

Promoting Inclusive Political Participation

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The political dominance in South Sudan is partly sustained by the fragmentation and marginalization of opposition groups. Encouraging unity among opposition parties and movements can enhance political competition and challenge the monopoly of the ruling party. Mechanisms such as coalition-building, joint platforms, and inclusive dialogue forums can help create a stronger, more coherent opposition voice.

In addition, it is crucial to promote grassroots political mobilization. Civil society, youth organizations, and women's groups should be empowered to participate meaningfully in national dialogue and decision-making processes. Arriola (2013) suggests that broadening the political space through inclusive participation weakens elite hegemony and contributes to more responsive governance. Political education and civic engagement campaigns can further raise awareness about democratic rights, helping citizens hold leaders accountable.

Enhancing Transparency in Resource Allocation

One of the primary enablers of political dominance in South Sudan is the centralized control over oil revenues and other state resources. To combat patronage politics, it is essential to implement robust anti-corruption mechanisms and ensure transparency in resource management. This includes public audits, open budgeting processes, and the establishment of oversight bodies with enforcement power.

Johnson (2016) highlights that patronage systems thrive in opaque environments. By introducing transparency and accountability frameworks—such as a national procurement authority, a reformed revenue authority, and citizen budget monitoring—South Sudan can reduce the misuse of public funds. Equitable distribution of resources among regions and ethnic communities will also help to address historical grievances and reduce the reliance of local leaders on dominant political figures for survival.

Reforming the Security Sector

The politicization of security forces poses a significant obstacle to democratic governance. To promote neutrality and professionalism within the military and police, comprehensive security sector reform (SSR) is essential. This includes redefining the role of the military to focus on national defense rather than internal politics, and ensuring that appointments and promotions are based on merit rather than ethnic or political affiliation.

According to the Small Arms Survey (2020), current integration processes have failed to create a unified and depoliticized army. Future reforms should involve vetting, training, and human rights education, alongside civilian oversight mechanisms. By creating a security sector that serves all citizens rather than select elites, trust in state institutions can be restored, and political dominance reduced.

Strengthening Regional and International Oversight

The international community has played a vital role in shaping South Sudan's political trajectory, but greater effectiveness and accountability are needed. Regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU), and global institutions like the United Nations must remain actively engaged. Their role should go beyond mediation to include monitoring compliance with peace agreements and imposing sanctions on violators.

The International Crisis Group (2019) underscores that without sustained international oversight, dominant political actors often backtrack on commitments. Therefore, international actors should support institution-building, facilitate inclusive dialogue processes, and provide technical assistance for electoral reform. Financial aid should be conditioned on measurable progress in governance and human rights, ensuring that external support does not unintentionally sustain elite dominance.

RECOMMENDATION

An in-depth examination of South Sudan's political environment reveals several structural and strategic factors that reinforce political dominance. The post-conflict nature of the state has enabled elites to consolidate power using formal and informal mechanisms. These reviews illustrate how control over resources, weak institutions, fragmented opposition, and international dynamics collectively entrench ruling power, primarily under the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Government (SPLM-IG). The below recommendations would gear towards reinforce political dominance:

Patronage Networks and Resource Control

Political parties, particularly the SPLM-IG, maintain dominance through control of state

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resources, including oil revenues. The distribution of wealth through patronage networks strengthens loyalty among key elites and marginalized communities, reducing opposition effectiveness (Johnson, 2016; Santoro, 2021).

One of the most critical mechanisms for maintaining political dominance in South Sudan is the use of patronage networks linked to control over national resources, especially oil revenues. The SPLM-IG has strategically utilized state resources to distribute wealth to political allies, tribal leaders, and military commanders. This system reinforces loyalty while dissuading dissent among elites and influential community figures. Johnson (2016) and Santoro (2021) argue that this patronage-based governance structure is deeply entrenched in South Sudan's political fabric, making it difficult for alternative power centers to emerge.

Oil revenue, accounting for the bulk of national income, is often allocated with little transparency, primarily benefiting those within the ruling coalition. Contracts, jobs, and development projects are selectively distributed to secure political allegiance and neutralize potential rivals. In rural and marginalized regions, patronage helps suppress resistance by ensuring basic services or security provision in exchange for political support. However, this creates dependency rather than development, stalling institutional reform and inclusive economic growth. In turn, citizens often align with dominant parties not by choice but out of economic necessity, undermining the authenticity of political participation and reducing the effectiveness of opposition movements.

Manipulation of Political Institutions

Electoral processes and judicial institutions lack independence, allowing dominant parties to influence decision-making. The failure to conduct credible elections since independence further consolidates power within ruling elites (Freedom House, 2023).

Another significant finding is the extent to which political institutions are manipulated to consolidate elite control. Electoral processes in South Sudan have repeatedly been delayed, with no national elections conducted since independence in 2011. According to Freedom House (2023), the ruling elite continues to govern through extended mandates, circumventing the democratic process. The electoral commission lacks independence and is often perceived as an extension of the executive branch, further eroding public confidence in its capacity to organize credible elections.

Similarly, judicial institutions suffer from political interference. Courts rarely adjudicate political cases impartially, and the rule of law is selectively applied to favor those in power. Laws restricting freedom of assembly, press, and political organizing are used to silence dissent. The absence of institutional accountability enables the ruling elite to suppress opposition voices and manipulate legal frameworks to remain in power. These practices are not isolated but are part of a broader strategy to weaken democratic institutions, resulting in a pseudo-democratic state where political competition is effectively neutralized.

Fragmentation of Opposition Parties

While South Sudan has multiple political parties, opposition groups remain fragmented and lack a unified strategy to challenge dominant actors. Intra-party conflicts within the SPLM-IO, for example, weaken the broader opposition landscape (Rolandsen, 2015).

Despite the existence of multiple political parties in South Sudan, opposition movements remain weak and fragmented. One of the key factors contributing to this fragmentation is internal conflict within opposition groups themselves. For instance, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO) has experienced splits between factions loyal to Riek Machar and other emerging leaders. Rolandsen (2015) notes that such divisions have prevented the opposition from forming a cohesive political front capable of effectively challenging the dominance of the SPLM-IG.

This fragmentation is further exacerbated by co-optation strategies employed by the ruling party. Through the use of selective incentives such as ministerial appointments or integration into security forces, opposition leaders are often drawn into the system they were meant to contest. As a result, political pluralism becomes more nominal than real. Additionally, the lack of resources, limited access to media, and restricted civic space prevent opposition parties from organizing at the grassroots level. Without unity, coherent ideology, or a viable electoral strategy, the opposition remains peripheral in South Sudan's political landscape.

Security Sector Influence

The military and security apparatus are closely tied to ruling party elites. The integration of opposition

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forces into the national army under the peace agreement has not significantly altered power dynamics, as security institutions remain under government control (Small Arms Survey, 2020).

The militarization of politics in South Sudan plays a central role in preserving the dominance of the ruling elite. The SPLM-IG maintains strong ties with the security sector, which includes the military, police, and intelligence services. While the 2018 peace agreement called for the integration of opposition forces into the national army, this process has been uneven and heavily influenced by political considerations. The Small Arms Survey (2020) highlights that despite integration on paper, the command structure and operational control remain firmly in the hands of the government.

This tight control of the security apparatus provides the ruling elite with a monopoly on violence, which is used not only to counter insurgent threats but also to intimidate opposition leaders and suppress protest movements. Security institutions are often deployed to surveil, detain, or harass political activists, journalists, and civil society actors. In some regions, militarized governance replaces civilian administration, further blurring the line between political authority and military power. The loyalty of military elites is maintained through patronage, ethnic alignment, and promises of impunity, making them unlikely to support democratic transitions that could threaten their interests.

External Mediation and Power Balancing

The role of international and regional actors in peace negotiations has reinforced the dominance of existing elites. While mediation efforts aim to foster inclusivity, they often legitimize ruling parties by providing them with formal political recognition and resources (Paris, 2004; Schomerus & Aalen, 2016).

International and regional actors have played a significant role in South Sudan's political processes, especially through peace negotiations and transitional arrangements. While these interventions have helped prevent the total breakdown of the state, they have also had the unintended effect of reinforcing the power of dominant political elites. Paris (2004) and Schomerus & Aalen (2016) argue that peace agreements often prioritize the inclusion of warring factions at the expense of broader political reform or accountability.

In South Sudan, external mediation led to the legitimization of both the government and opposition leaders by incorporating them into transitional structures with significant autonomy and access to resources. Although this arrangement is intended to ensure stability, it effectively sidelines civil society and other political actors who are not part of the armed elite. Furthermore, donor fatigue, competing geopolitical interests, and limited leverage have reduced the ability of international actors to push for meaningful democratic reforms. Instead, peace becomes synonymous with power-sharing among elites, perpetuating a cycle where conflict is rewarded with political capital rather than penalized.

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