Sudan and South Sudan: Two Decades Since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Reassessing Peace, Statehood, and Conflict

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Abstract: This article offers a retrospective assessment of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed on January 9, 2005, between the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). Twenty years later, the initial hopes of peace, democratization, and development have largely dissipated, replaced by cycles of violence, state collapse, and humanitarian crises in both Sudan and South Sudan. Drawing from previous research and updated conflict analysis, the article explores the causes of regression, the limitations of separatism as a conflict resolution tool, and the regional implications of failing peace agreements.

Keywords: Comprehensive Peace Agreement, Sudan, South Sudan, separatism, conflict resolution, state failure, CPA+20.

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Introduction

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was hailed in 2005 as a landmark achievement, ending Africa's longest-running civil war—a two-decade conflict between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) that claimed over two million lives and displaced millions more. Negotiated with the active involvement of regional and international actors, including IGAD, the United States, and the United Nations, the CPA was envisioned not only as a ceasefire but as a comprehensive political roadmap toward a

new Sudanese state rooted in democracy, power-sharing, and self-determination (Young, 2012; Rolandsen, 2011; Dagne, 2011, Sandu, 2014a, 2014b).

The CPA was structured around six protocols and agreements: the Machakos Protocol, the Protocol on Power Sharing, the Protocol on Wealth Sharing, the Protocol on Security Arrangements, and two protocols on conflict areas (Southern Kordofan/Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, and Abyei). At its heart, the agreement allowed for a six-year interim period of autonomous governance in Southern Sudan, culminating in a referendum on independence. It also included ambitious provisions for democratic elections, oil revenue sharing, and the integration of former adversaries into a unified national army (CPA, 2005; Johnson, 2011; Young, 2012).

Initial optimism was high. Elections in 2010 proceeded and the referendum in 2011 overwhelmingly favored secession, South Sudan becoming at that moment the world's newest country on July 9, 2011. Yet the euphoria quickly gave way to deep political instability because in the North, the Sudanese state under Omar al-Bashir became increasingly autocratic and militarized, marginalizing opposition groups and neglecting the promised democratic transformation and in the South, the SPLM transitioned poorly from a liberation movement to a governing party. Ethnic divisions, unresolved border issues, and competition over oil fields rapidly escalated into violent conflict (de Waal, 2015; Rolandsen, 2015; Johnson, 2016).

The years that followed showed just how fragile peace can be when it's built mainly on deals between political elites and formal institutions, without making sure that ordinary people are included and that justice and strong governance are in place. In Sudan, hopes for democracy faded as military leaders tightened their grip on power and long-standing grievances in Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan remained unresolved. The 2019 revolution that removed Bashir briefly raised expectations for real change, but the 2021 military coup—and later, the 2023 fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—pushed the country back into turmoil.

On the other side, in South Sudan, a civil war erupted in 2013 between forces aligned with President Salva Kiir and those supporting Vice President Riek Machar. The conflict quickly split the young nation along ethnic lines and forced millions of people from their homes. Although peace agreements were signed in 2015 and again in a revised form in 2018, they have struggled to stop repeated outbreaks of violence, political infighting, and a deepening humanitarian crisis (International Crisis Group, 2014; de Waal, 2014; Jok, 2017).

Thus, while the CPA brought an official end to the North–South war and created a path for Southern Sudan's self-determination, it ultimately failed to deliver lasting peace, meaningful democratic change, or stable governance. Two decades later, both Sudan and South Sudan remain caught in internal conflict, economic decline, and severe humanitarian crises. This article revisits the CPA in light of these outcomes, examining whether it truly accomplished its goals or simply delayed deeper structural problems.

CPA's Expectations and Structural Weaknesses

The CPA was built on six protocols that covered issues such as autonomy, oil revenue, political representation, security reform, and the path toward the 2011 referendum. Among these, the Machakos Protocol and the Power- and Wealth-Sharing Agreements were especially important, as they laid the political and economic groundwork for the entire peace process. The Machakos Protocol, in particular, introduced two crucial ideas—Southern Sudan's right to self-determination and the separation of religion and state—creating the breakthrough that allowed negotiations to move forward (CPA, 2005; Tønnesson, 2008; Young, 2012).

The Power Sharing Agreement detailed the structure of the transitional governments, including the Government of National Unity (GoNU) and the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), laying out the interim balance of political authority. Meanwhile, the Wealth Sharing Agreement, centered on the division of oil revenues, was crucial to maintaining short-term trust between the parties, although it ultimately deepened mutual suspicions due to asymmetric control of infrastructure and transparency (CPA, 2005; Large & Patey, 2011; LeRiche & Arnold, 2012). These core elements aimed to institutionalize peace and cooperation, but they also entrenched an elite bargain with little grassroots legitimacy. However, despite its ambitious and multifaceted framework, the CPA suffered from critical design flaws that undermined its long-term effectiveness.

One of the most serious weaknesses was the vagueness of enforcement mechanisms. While timelines and benchmarks were outlined, such as the scheduling of elections, the withdrawal of troops, or the establishment of joint military units, there were no credible guarantees for implementation, many clauses being phrased in general or aspirational terms, allowing for varying interpretations and selective compliance. More importantly, there were no clear consequences for non-compliance, nor were there strong institutional actors empowered to enforce the agreement impartially. The CPA lacked an independent dispute resolution mechanism that could arbitrate breaches, and even the Ceasefire Political Commission was largely under-resourced and politically constrained (Pantuliano, 2010).

This legal and institutional ambiguity created fertile ground for manipulation. Both the National Congress Party (NCP) and the SPLM quickly learned to use the agreement's silences and gray areas to their advantage. Deadlines for troop redeployments were delayed under security pretexts, oil revenue-sharing was complicated by a lack of financial transparency, and the national census, crucial for elections and representation, was politicized or postponed. Furthermore, in the absence of binding international oversight or credible guarantors with enforcement authority, external actors were often relegated to issuing statements of concern rather than applying leverage. This permissive environment enabled both sides to honor the CPA in form while undermining it in practice, eroding trust and weakening the agreement's legitimacy.

Moreover, third-party accountability was weak. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and external actors like the US and the UN played essential roles

in facilitating the agreement, providing diplomatic legitimacy, technical advice, and logistical support. However, their involvement diminished substantially after the CPA was signed because these actors lacked sustained political will, financial commitment, and institutional continuity to enforce the deal's implementation, their leverage being further undermined by competing interests, inconsistent messaging, and overreliance on Khartoum's cooperation for regional counterterrorism and migration controls (Dagne, 2011; Young, 2012).

As a result, these international guarantors struggled to put forward a coordinated and effective strategy for the period after the agreement was signed. IGAD, for example, was hindered by divisions within its own membership; each member state had to juggle its relationship with Khartoum alongside its domestic political priorities, which made it difficult for the organization to apply consistent or unified pressure (Large & Goloobа-Mutebi, 2016; Brosché & Höglund, 2011). The UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), which was supposed to oversee security arrangements and help support the development of new state institutions, faced persistent challenges as well. It was chronically under-resourced and forced to respond to multiple crises at once—most notably the escalating violence in Darfur—leaving it overstretched and unable to fully concentrate on the CPA's core objectives. Western governments, meanwhile, frequently allowed immediate security priorities to overshadow concerns about human rights and democratic reform. Issues such as Sudan's cooperation on counterterrorism and the management of refugee flows often took precedence, which in practice gave Bashir's regime considerable leeway and contributed to a climate of impunity for electoral abuses and human rights violations. Moreover, the rotating nature of leadership in donor capitals meant that diplomatic engagement lacked continuity. New administrations in Washington or London recalibrated priorities, sometimes reducing funding or shifting focus to other global hotspots. Without consistent high-level advocacy, neither the NCP nor the SPLM felt compelled to honor contentious provisions - be it equitable integration of armed forces, transparent oil revenue accounting, or constitutional reforms.

In the absence of credible enforcement mechanisms, such as sanctions, structured mediation teams, or joint monitoring bodies with real authority, international actors resorted to public statements, exhortations, and ad hoc commissions. These symbolic gestures had little deterrent effect. The CPA thus devolved into a political pact between two armed elites, who perceived the agreement more as a tactical ceasefire and power-sharing mechanism than a genuine framework for societal transformation. Elite interests were secured, but deeper issues of governance, justice, and inclusion remained unaddressed, sowing the seeds for future breakdown.

The agreement's overreliance on elite-level negotiations effectively excluded civil society, traditional authorities, women's groups, youth organizations, and other marginalized populations from shaping the post-conflict order. This exclusionary approach prioritized swift consensus among armed elites but neglected the diverse social fabric of Sudan and South Sudan. As a result, key constituencies such as internally displaced persons, pastoralist

communities in borderlands, and minority ethnic groups in contested areas like Abyei and Southern Kordofan had no formal avenue to express grievances or influence institutional design. In this regard, I already stated that stated that peace agreements lacking broad-based participation often embed latent fault lines, as marginalized actors remain outside official power structures (Sandu, 2012). Without mechanisms for community-level consultation, traditional dispute resolution systems were sidelined, and women's roles in reconciliation and grassroots governance were largely ignored despite their significant contributions during wartime mediation. This top-down model also undermined the legitimacy of transitional institutions, as local stakeholders viewed them as imposed rather than reflective of shared interests.

Furthermore, the absence of quotas or consultative bodies for non-elite participants meant that legal and constitutional drafting processes were confined to a small cadre of technocrats and military representatives. Consequently, the resulting frameworks failed to incorporate customary land rights, gender-sensitive provisions, or minority language protections, exacerbating distrust. As subsequent local and state elections unfolded, low voter turnout and sporadic protests signaled that many communities felt alienated from the political project the CPA purported to launch. In essence, by sidelining civil society and other non-elite groups, the CPA entrenched a narrow elite bargain and missed the opportunity to forge a more inclusive social contract—one capable of addressing the multifaceted dimensions of identity, resource sharing, and justice necessary for durable peace.

The CPA envisioned a dual-state solution under a unity-with-choice model: the South was granted autonomy through the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), while remaining part of a federal Sudanese state during the six-year interim period (CPA, 2005; LeRiche & Arnold, 2016). In theory, this arrangement would allowed for peaceful coexistence and capacity-building before the 2011 referendum. In practice, it created overlapping and often contradictory institutions, generating confusion and rivalry between Juba and Khartoum. Instead of fostering cooperation, the interim period became a zero-sum contest over resources, legitimacy, and military power, the NCP retaining *de facto* control over oil infrastructure, while SPLM leveraged oil wealth for rapid militarization. In the same time, each side fortified its own administrative apparatus without building mechanisms for integration or reconciliation, the promised "making unity attractive" clause of the CPA being largely ignored, as neither party invested in the shared governance structures required to sustain a united Sudan.

Historically, the CPA was considered a monumental political achievement, but it was not a transformative social contract because it frizzed the conflict without dismantling its drivers: ethnic polarization, resource asymmetry, and center-periphery marginalization. In essence, the CPA was a short-term fix dressed as a long-term solution, it provided a necessary breathing space after decades of bloodshed but failed to lay the foundation for sustainable peace.

By focusing on the North-South divide and neglecting other marginalized regions, such as Darfur, Eastern Sudan, and the Nuba Mountains, the CPA reproduced the very grievances it sought to overcome.

South Sudan:
From Independence to Internal Collapse

The declaration of independence in July 2011 marked a historic moment, celebrated as the culmination of decades-long struggle for self-determination. The international community welcomed the birth of South Sudan with diplomatic recognition, generous aid pledges, and strong support for peacebuilding but the euphoria masked deep structural vulnerabilities inherited from a protracted civil war: militarized politics, underdeveloped institutions, and profound ethnic fragmentation.

Within just two years, internal political rivalries erupted into full-scale civil war. The December 2013 power struggle between President Salva Kiir, of the Dinka ethnic group, and Vice President Riek Machar, a prominent Nuer leader, quickly morphed into ethnically driven massacres, particularly in Juba, Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal. These atrocities were not merely spontaneous outbreaks of violence, but manifestations of long-simmering ethnic grievances, historical power imbalances, and deep-seated mistrust between communities. Since the SPLA's early formation during the Second Civil War, tensions between the Dinka and Nuer factions had been managed rather than resolved, often suppressed under the military hierarchy of the liberation movement. The SPLM's post-independence political structure failed to address these cleavages, instead reinforcing them through ethicized appointments, exclusive patronage networks, and uneven development (Horowitz, 1985; Roethke, 2011).

When the 2013 political rift occurred, these unresolved tensions were easily mobilized into violence. In Juba, the massacre of hundreds of Nuer civilians by elements of the presidential guard was carried out with coordination and planning, according to reports by the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (2014). Similarly, reprisal attacks by Nuer militias in Bentiu and Bor involved the targeting of Dinka civilians and foreign nationals, including within churches, hospitals, and UN compounds, all actions that went beyond spontaneous violence and suggested political orchestration aimed at terrorizing and destabilizing opponents.

The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the African Union Commission of Inquiry (2015) concluded that both government and opposition forces engaged in systematic acts that may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity, including widespread killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement. These findings underscore that the conflict blurred the line between civil war and ethnic cleansing, as violence was often pursued not just to defeat adversaries militarily, but to remove entire communities

from contested areas. In this context, ethnic identity became a proxy for political allegiance, and civilians bore the brunt of militarized factionalism rooted in the failures of nation-building and inclusive governance.

According to UN estimates, the conflict claimed more than 400,000 lives between 2013 and 2018, displacing over 2 million internally and forcing another 2.3 million into exile across Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan. The scale of violence, particularly its civilian toll, underscored the complete breakdown of state authority and the failure of the SPLM-led government to provide security or uphold basic norms of governance.

Beyond elite rivalries, the root causes of collapse lay in the SPLM's failure to evolve from a liberation movement into a functional governing party. The party's internal hierarchy remained largely shaped by wartime command structures, where loyalty to former commanders often superseded institutional norms or meritocratic advancement (de Waal, 2014). This entrenched a system of militarized patronage in which political authority was fused with military rank, eroding the distinction between civil service and command chains. The SPLM's internal elections were manipulated to consolidate power, Salva Kiir's 2013 changes to delegate selection rules marginalized dissenting voices and entrenched his control over party machinery (International Crisis Group, 2014). State institutions were hollowed out by patronage networks, dominated by generals and ethnic allies, especially from Kiir's Dinka community. Governance was militarized, with key ministries and agencies staffed based on wartime loyalties. These dynamics fed massive corruption. For example, the 2007 Auditor-General's report identified over $114 million in oil revenue unaccounted for, enough, it noted, to import 3.800 tractors (Patey, 2017). In the notorious dura saga of 2008, over $2 billion was allocated to bogus grain storage contracts, but most of the infrastructure was never built (The Sudd Institute, 2014).

Related to the above, public finance lacked transparency, and military payrolls were inflated with ghost soldiers, a common strategy for diverting salaries to political patrons (de Waal, 2014). The resulting economic dysfunction disproportionately affected oil-producing regions, where public services remained absent despite billions in extractive revenue flowing through Juba (Johnson, 2016). According to UNDP and the World Bank, over 75% of oil revenue was absorbed by security spending between 2011 and 2015, while rural infrastructure and health services were left to international NGOs (World Bank, 2017).

This structural fragility was compounded by a political culture of exclusion, where dissent was treated not merely as opposition but as treasonous defiance. Internal critics of government policy, particularly those outside the Dinka elite or SPLM mainstream, were harassed, arrested, or marginalized from political discourse. Public discourse was tightly controlled; media outlets faced censorship, while journalists and activists were routinely detained without charge or disappeared (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Local governance, instead of being an arena for participatory decision-making, was often co-opted by former military officers or warlords who used local offices as platforms to sustain patronage, extort resources, or mobilize armed youth. This elite capture of

subnational administration disrupted traditional authority structures and curtailed the role of chiefs and elders in conflict mediation, roles which had been vital during the civil war era (Leonardi et al., 2010). Due to this context, civil society organizations and independent media operated under constant threat. NGOs were subjected to bureaucratic obstruction and surveillance and their staff were threatened for exposing corruption or human rights abuses. This created a chilling effect that silenced local civic engagement and disconnected peacebuilding initiatives from grassroots constituencies.

These dynamics significantly exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions. Exclusion and repression fueled perceptions among marginalized groups that political change could only come through violence. For example, many Nuer youth joined armed opposition groups not merely in allegiance to Riek Machar, but in reaction to systemic exclusion and targeted violence against their communities. The result was the collapse of any social contract between the state and its citizens. Trust in state institutions plummeted, especially among non-Dinka populations, who came to view the government not as a neutral arbiter, but as a partisan actor. This legitimacy crisis was compounded by the absence of basic services, as state presence in many rural areas was associated solely with security crackdowns or elite resource extraction.

Unfortunately, South Sudan's descent into war was a foreseeable outcome of a political system constructed on exclusion, militarism, and unaccountable leadership. Without mechanisms for inclusive governance, accountability, and civic participation, violence became the default language of political expression.

Even the peace agreements, namely the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) and its 2018 Revitalized version were shaped by regional and international mediators largely on dividing power among elites rather than addressing grievances of war-affected communities. Provisions such as the unification of armed forces, transitional justice, and federal restructuring were poorly implemented or indefinitely delayed.

By 2025, the peace process has deteriorated further. Riek Machar was arrested in early 2025, accused of conspiring against the unity government, armed groups splintered, and violence has surged in Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity States. Government control in many regions is nominal at best, with humanitarian actors often the only visible authority.

The humanitarian crisis is severe, with more than 9.4 million people, over 75% of the population, requiring assistance. Food insecurity affects 7 million South Sudanese, with multiple regions being on the edge of famine. In addition, over 800,000 Sudanese refugees have entered South Sudan since 2023, fleeing the northern war, their presence intensifying he pressure on resources and inflaming intercommunal tensions in host communities.

Sudan:
Civil War and State Fragmentation Post-2011

The secession of South Sudan in 2011 was both a diplomatic triumph and a critical rupture in Sudan's political economy. It deprived Sudan of nearly 75% of its oil revenue (Patey, 2017), destabilizing the foundation on which the Khartoum regime had long sustained its patronage networks. In the immediate aftermath, the Sudanese government, under President Omar al-Bashir, turned increasingly inward, consolidating control through repression rather than reform. The promised democratic transitions under the post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) roadmap were shelved, while the National Congress Party (NCP) deepened its militarized governance model.

This post-secession fragility laid the groundwork for Sudan's current crisis. The military institutions that underpinned the Bashir regime, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), grew into rival centers of power. Originally formed from the Janjaweed militias implicated in the Darfur genocide, the RSF was institutionalized to suppress peripheral dissent but evolved into an autonomous actor with its own foreign sponsors, economic interests, and political ambitions (Tubiana, 2017). The SAF, by contrast, retained formal national legitimacy but struggled to reform its command structures or secure the loyalty of non-Arab regions.

The collapse of the transitional government in 2021, followed by full-scale war between SAF and RSF in 2023, was, as in the case of South Sudan, the culmination of decades of exclusionary politics, uneven development, and security-sector fragmentation (International Crisis Group, 2023).

By 2025, as Sudan entered its third year of war, the country had descended into a profound humanitarian disaster and a near-total political collapse. UN officials now describe the situation as the "*largest and most devastating humanitarian crisis*" in the world with around 25 million people, more than half of Sudan's population, requiring urgent assistance, and well over 150.000 people being killed (Vision of Humanity, 2025). Khartoum, the capital, along with El Fasher, has been transformed into a largely deserted battlefield. The state itself has crumbled, ministries no longer function, courts stand empty, and national archives are abandoned or destroyed. In reality, the authority of the central government has been replaced by competing armed groups. Experts describe this moment as a slow and painful unravelling of the Sudanese state, a process in which basic functions like tax collection, public services, or even security are no longer provided by any national institutions but by militias, informal networks, and local strongmen. Analysts emphasize that this isn't a temporary breakdown but a deeper structural shift in how power operates across the country. As one Sudanese observer remarked, the capital was now "ruled by the power of arms", with new centers of authority emerging in the vacuum. RSF commanders, former rebel leaders, tribal sheikhs, and other local figures have stepped in to govern where the state once stood (Sudan Media Forum, 2025).

The current war emerged from a power struggle that had been simmering within Sudan's former ruling system for years. After the 2019 revolution removed President Omar al-Bashir from power, the country entered a fragile transition shared between civilian leaders and the military. That arrangement collapsed in 2021 when the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) joined together to stage a coup. But the alliance was short-lived, by April 2023, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, commanded by General Hemedti, turning their weapons on each other. This split did not come out of nowhere but it was rooted in Sudan's long history of unequal power. Since independence, governments dominated by Nile-valley elites repeatedly sidelined the country's peripheral regions. As Horner (2025) explains, the secession of South Sudan in 2011, taking with it roughly 85% of Sudan's oil wealth, left the Sudanese state financially drained and increasingly dependent on coercive force. Earlier conflicts in Darfur had already weakened national authority, and Bashir's strategy of empowering the RSF was meant to counterbalance his own army so when the transitional political deal fell apart, these two armed factions, each with its own foreign backers, economic networks, and ambitions, quickly moved from political rivalry to open war, dragging the entire country into the conflict.

Sudan is now, in practice, carved into rival territories controlled by competing forces. In the early months of the war, the RSF seized most of Khartoum, pushing the national army south and east. By the end of 2023, the RSF had expanded its control across almost all of Darfur and parts of Kordofan and Blue Nile (Fenton-Harvey, 2025). It later announced its own "Government of Peace and Unity" to run these areas, collecting "protection" fees, appointing local administrators, and functioning in ways that resemble the governance structures seen in failed states like Somalia (Aljazeera, 2025).

The SAF, though significantly weakened, has maintained its grip on the east and northeast. It recaptured the strategic city of Wad Madani in Gezira State in January 2025 and has fortified its presence around Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Port Sudan now serves as a de facto capital for the army-backed government, where national ministries operate in exile.

Other groups have also carved out their own spheres of influence. Splinter factions from former rebel movements, some of which signed the Juba Peace Agreement, still control sections of Darfur and Kordofan. In other areas, tribal leaders have revived traditional authorities to fill the vacuum left by collapsing state institutions.

Taken together, these overlapping zones of control mean that Sudan effectively no longer has a single functioning government. Instead, a patchwork of armed groups and local authorities govern different parts of the country, each exercising de facto power in their own territories.

Humanitarian Impact and Service Collapse

The human cost of the war is overwhelming. By mid-2025, an estimated 12–14 million people had been displaced, roughly one in every four Sudanese. Millions have crossed borders into Chad, Egypt, South Sudan, and other neighboring countries, placing enormous pressure on already fragile systems. Inside Sudan, the destruction of basic services has been catastrophic. UN and NGO assessments indicate that 70–80% of hospitals in active conflict zones are no longer functioning. In Khartoum and other besieged cities, targeted attacks on clinics, including a deadly drone strike on Daman Hospital, and the rapid spread of cholera highlight the total collapse of public health infrastructure (Hudson & Strucke, 2024; Washington Centre, 2025).

Food insecurity has reached devastating levels. With major supply routes cut off and local production disrupted, farms and markets have ground to a halt. By late 2024, around 8.5 million people, most of them living in RSF-held areas, were facing emergency levels of hunger. Humanitarian agencies report that famine-like conditions are already affecting hundreds of thousands of children. Overall, nearly half of Sudan's 50 million people now require life-saving assistance (Hudson & Strucke, 2024). In essence, the war has wiped out decades of development gains. Water and sanitation systems have fallen apart, markets are empty or destroyed, schools have closed, and courts and other public institutions have stopped functioning. Everyday life for millions has been reduced to a struggle for survival.

This devastating situation reflects much deeper dynamics than a simple power struggle. The SAF frames the war as a fight to defend the "Nile Valley" order, portraying themselves as the guardians of Sudan's historical center against what they see as rebellious peripheries. In contrast, the RSF casts itself as a champion of marginalized regions, arguing that decades of neglect and exclusion have left the peripheries with no choice but to assert themselves. Both sides are haunted by fear of retribution if the other emerges victorious, a fear that has played out in the widespread looting of Khartoum by RSF-aligned militias, often interpreted as settling long-standing scores (Horner, 2025).

Yet the RSF's ambitions extend beyond short-term battlefield gains. Its Nairobi charter, unveiled in February 2025, lays out a vision for a new, decentralized, secular and inclusive Sudan. Observers remain skeptical, however, seeing the RSF's so-called "Government of Peace and Unity" largely as a strategy to legitimize a *de facto* partition of the country. Sudan today increasingly resembles a patchwork of semi-autonomous zones: Darfur under RSF control, the Nile states dominated by the army, and pockets of "liberated" territory managed by local militias or tribal elders. In this sense, the crisis has far outgrown its original trigger in 2023—the question of integrating the RSF into the national army—and now points to a broader pattern of state failure. Analysts warn that Sudan is not collapsing overnight but slowly fragmenting, as central authority erodes and localized powers fill the vacuum.

Regional and International Dimensions

Sudan's fragmentation has set off alarm bells across the region and among global powers. The war has spilled over its borders, with over a million people fleeing to Chad, Egypt, and other neighboring countries, creating severe humanitarian and political pressures. There are also fears that militias could carry the conflict across frontiers, raising tensions throughout the region. In response, the African Union and United Nations have repeatedly condemned any attempt to break up Sudan, emphasizing the importance of maintaining its territorial unity. Diplomatic relations are tense and often fraught with friction. Kenya, for example, faced criticism from Sudan's army-backed government after hosting RSF leaders for the announcement of their parallel government charter, while the United States and European Union have continuously pushed for a return to civilian-led governance (Okello, 2025).

Foreign involvement on both sides has only deepened the stalemate. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, concerned about Nile water rights and Islamist influence, have supplied military support to the SAF (Vision of Humanity, 2025). The RSF, in turn, is believed to receive backing from external factors such as Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar and the UAE, who provide funding and logistical support (Fenton-Harvey, 2025). Even larger powers like Turkey, China, and Russia are reportedly involved, selling drones and other weapons to whichever faction aligns with their strategic goals. In this way, Sudan has become not only a domestic conflict but also a proxy battlefield for broader regional and international ambitions.

This fractured reality makes any path to peace extremely difficult. While most external actors agree that a settlement must avoid partition, the warring factions themselves now openly discuss separate zones of control or dual governance. In April 2025, UN officials warned that the RSF's parallel administration could entrench divisions even further. Meanwhile, the civilian political scene is in disarray: the opposition coalition has split into pro- and anti-RSF factions, undermining a unified front for negotiation. With massive stockpiles of weapons spread across multiple actors and mutual distrust running deep, many analysts doubt that either side can achieve a decisive military victory.

Based on the above analysis, Sudan and South Sudan share several key features of state fragility:

1. Militarization of governance: In both places, political authority was fused with armed command. In Juba, the SPLM's wartime hierarchy persisted in government; in Khartoum, competing military factions assumed political primacy, undermining civilian oversight (de Waal, 2014; Johnson, 2016).
2. Elite-driven peace processes: The CPA (2005), the ARCSS (2015), and the Juba Peace Agreement (2020) prioritized deals among armed actors over inclusive societal participation. This elite-centric approach excluded women's groups, youth, and peripheral communities from shaping governance futures, creating legitimacy deficits (Sandu, 2012).

3. Patronage and resource capture: In both cases, oil revenues became instruments of elite consolidation. Sudan's loss of southern oil exposed the fragility of its fiscal structure; South Sudan's control over oil after independence led to massive corruption and inequitable distribution (Patey, 2017; World Bank, 2017).
4. Erosion of civil society: Repressive laws, arbitrary detention, and securitized development spaces marginalized civil society in both countries. Journalists, human rights defenders, and traditional leaders faced persecution or co-optation, weakening nonviolent channels of accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Leonardi et al., 2010).

Yet, the trajectories also diverge in significant ways. South Sudan's collapse occurred in the context of new state formation, where institutions were still embryonic, and national identity was contested. Its political elites, although nominally united under the SPLM, were divided along deeply entrenched ethnic and regional lines, with limited experience in bureaucratic governance. Sudan, in contrast, inherited a relatively developed bureaucratic state apparatus with a longer history of civilian governance, albeit one frequently overridden by military coups. Its fragmentation, therefore, reflects a de-institutionalization process where once-centralized authority is now diffused among warlords, tribal leaders, and foreign proxies.

Moreover, Sudan's geopolitical positioning, bordering Libya, Egypt, the Red Sea, and the Sahel, has rendered its collapse more internationalized. External actors, such as Egypt, the UAE, Russia, and Saudi Arabia, have taken sides in the SAF-RSF conflict, transforming Sudan into a regional proxy battlefield. By contrast, South Sudan's conflict, though regionally significant, has remained more insulated, with Uganda as the primary external military actor (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

The Failure of Separatism as Sustainable Resolution

Despite Sudan's 2011 split into two countries, the hoped-for peace has proved elusive. Two decades after the 2005 CPA and South Sudan's 2011 independence, violence and instability continue on both sides of the former border (Jok, 2015; Center for Preventive Action, 2025). In Sudan's case, the breakup merely shifted conflict, Darfur, Blue Nile and Kordofan insurgencies erupted and, in 2023, a new civil war erupted among competing generals. In South Sudan, the nascent state quickly plunged into ethnic warfare. Scholars note that the CPA's "winlose" terms excluded vast swaths of society, so the settlement "neither saved the unity of the country nor produced peace" (Jok, 2015). In short, separation alone did not resolve the underlying drivers of conflict; instead, old grievances and new fractures were left unaddressed.

Enduring ethnic polarization and communal conflict

Separatism did not erase ethnic divisions; if anything, it cemented them into two weak states. South Sudan's post-independence politics became polarized along tribal lines. In December 2013 fighting erupted almost immediately between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir (from the Dinka ethnic group) and those aligned with Riek Machar (predominantly Nuer), fighting over control of oil-rich Upper Nile. Ordinary civilians were targeted "along ethnic lines," spreading violence into Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile states. Meanwhile Sudan's own marginalized regions (Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, etc.) remained restive after 2011. In both new countries, elites (and "ethnopreneurs") exploited cleavages: Jok (2015) observes that when a sense of nationhood is ignored, it "becomes much easier for 'ethnopreneurs' to divide communities, making a return to open conflict more likely". In short, separation froze in place the very communal grievances and competition over resources (land, oil, identity) that sparked war in the first place.

Fragile institutions and militarized politics

Neither Sudan nor South Sudan succeeded in building strong, lasting institutions after their split. In practice, both governments remained highly personalized and patrimonial, dominated by networks of loyalty rather than formal state structures. In South Sudan, the old SPLM/A leadership simply carried over into the new state, often placing generals and close allies into key civilian positions. Analysts from BTI (2024) note that while the SPLM initially claimed to be transforming into a democratic party, in reality "the leadership of the SPLM remained largely composed of generals," with the military exercising control over nearly all branches of government. During the 2013–2016 crises, President Kiir's government replaced dozens of officials with ethnic Dinka loyalists, further blurring "the lines between the executive, legislative, and military." The result was a military-dominated state where commanders used their positions to benefit their own factions rather than the broader population.

Sudan's institutions fared only marginally better. After Bashir's fall in 2019, the Transitional Government struggled to reform the security forces, and successive agreements repeatedly failed to address the root causes of grievances (Yaw Tchie & Zabala, 2024). In both countries, the rule of law remained weak: courts were easily captured by political interests, elections were postponed again and again, and public order was enforced by patronage-driven armies rather than impartial institutions. As Jok (2015) puts it, post-war rebel leaders who became rulers treated the state as a prize of victory, entitled to its national army, top jobs, contracts, and resources, rather than as a neutral bureaucracy to serve the population.

This deep institutional fragility, combined with the constant threat of coups or factional violence, meant that neither Sudan nor South Sudan was able to achieve the stable governance necessary for lasting peace.

Resource extraction, patronage and exclusion

Both Sudan and South Sudan quickly became what some scholars call "booty states," where oil and other natural resources were used to finance patronage networks rather than national development. South Sudan, for a brief moment after independence in 2011, appeared to be prosperous as oil revenues poured into the treasury. Yet scholars note that this wealth largely became "a slush fund for patronage politics and personal enrichment that the elite squabbled over," with very little reaching ordinary citizens (Chen, McCrone, & Mozersky, 2023). The new government used its oil income to co-opt rivals and strengthen security forces, rather than diversifying the economy or funding essential public services. Hladik (n.d.) sums up South Sudan's post-independence challenges bluntly: "poor governance... tribal and ethnic tensions, [and] a power structure of nepotism and clientelism".

Sudan followed a similar path. After losing most of its oil to the south, Khartoum turned to other extractive resources, including gold mining and large-scale land acquisitions in peripheral regions. In both countries, elites neglected state-building in favor of extraction. Schools, roads, and healthcare systems remained underfunded or abandoned. Easy access to resource rents fueled winner-take-all politics in both capitals, and patronage networks were often built along ethnic lines, entrenching certain groups in the army while others dominated civilian bureaucracy, which only deepened national divides. By 2013–2015, analysts were warning that local communities in both Sudans felt largely excluded from the benefits of independence, as wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a small ruling elite.

Elite-centric peacebuilding and the unfulfilled promise of peace

Finally, the peace mechanisms created by the CPA and later agreements never evolved into genuine, society-wide peacebuilding efforts. They were, at their core, bargains struck among political and military elites. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 is often celebrated for ending Africa's longest civil war, but its architecture revolved almost entirely around the SPLM and the Khartoum government dividing power, posts, and revenue. Ordinary people's demands, like justice for atrocities, truth-telling, reconciliation between communities shattered by decades of violence, barely made it into the text.

As Jok (2015) puts it, many African peace deals "rely too heavily on political agreements between politico-military elites", reducing peace to an exchange of "power and resource-sharing arrangements". Sudan's experience reflected this pattern almost perfectly. The CPA included a commitment to wider inclusivity, but this ambition was overshadowed by the urgency of managing elite rivalries. Local grievances, whether about land, displacement, or militia abuses, were never addressed in a sustained way. The result was a peace that looked solid on paper but hollow in practice.

South Sudan followed a similar trajectory after independence. The 2015 and 2018 revitalized agreements promised unity governments and power-sharing formulas, but these

arrangements repeatedly collapsed. Ceasefires were signed only to be broken within weeks. Key reforms like security sector unification, constitutional drafting, or land restitution were endlessly delayed or selectively implemented. For many citizens, these deals felt like political theater: elite factions reshuffling ministerial seats while life in towns and villages remained insecure, impoverished, and traumatized.

People quickly learned that peace agreements did not guarantee safety. When communities feel that justice is absent, when perpetrators keep their positions, and when promised reforms never materialize, public trust erodes and when this happens, even a single spark (an assassination, a disputed appointment, a local clash) can drag the country back into violence.

In both Sudans, the institutions created after the CPA (transitional parliaments, joint commissions, interim constitutions) failed to become guardians of the peace. Instead of embedding predictable rules or building a sense of shared national belonging, they became arenas for elite contestation. The promise of the CPA, that peace could be institutionalized and made resilient, never took root.

Today, both Sudan and South Sudan remain trapped in cycles of elite bargaining, where deals are struck at the top but fail to transform life at the bottom. Secession and renewed agreements were supposed to deliver reconciliation and development. Instead, they produced fragile arrangements unable to withstand the realities of mistrust, militarization, and unresolved historical grievances.

In sum, two decades after Sudan's partition, it is clear that separating the country was never a guarantee of lasting peace. Independence ended the North–South war but it did not uproot the deeper forces that had driven conflict for generations. Ethnic polarization remained sharp, political power stayed in the hands of narrow elites, and governance continued to rely on military dominance and patronage rather than inclusive institutions. In this sense, the warnings of scholars like Burton (1984) and Saideman (2001) were right: redrawing borders can stop one war, but it cannot resolve the underlying grievances that sparked it.

What unfolded after 2011 was not the creation of two new, modern states, but the rebranding of old systems. Leaders in both Khartoum and Juba simply carried forward the logics of control, favoritism, and resource extraction that had defined their wartime movements. Oil wealth, gold revenues, and political offices became tools to reward loyalists and consolidate power, not to build national unity or invest in people's lives.

The CPA had envisioned a pathway to peace, new institutions, shared governance, and transitional arrangements meant to cool tensions. But without serious reforms to ensure justice, broaden participation, and enforce accountability, those structures gradually eroded. As Englebert (2003) warned about many African transitions, the *promise of peace* must be rooted in functioning institutions. In Sudan and South Sudan, that promise was never fully anchored.

Ultimately, the experience of the two Sudans demonstrates that sustainable conflict resolution requires far more than drawing new borders. Peace demands a transformation of the social and political systems operating within those borders: institutions that protect rights, distribute resources fairly, and include citizens in shaping their own future. Without that deeper transformation, the cycle of violence is merely paused, not broken.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Twenty years after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, its legacy is both historic and tragic. The CPA marked a major diplomatic and political achievement, ending Africa's longest civil war and facilitating South Sudan's independence. Yet, the promise of peace and its transformation into a lasting institutional framework remains unfulfilled. As this article has shown, both Sudan and South Sudan descended into renewed violence, state collapse, and humanitarian catastrophe. Their trajectories reveal the limitations of peace agreements rooted in elite bargains and underscore the structural fragilities that persisted long after the ink had dried.

Several core lessons emerge from the CPA's legacy. First, elite-level agreements are not sustainable unless they are embedded in inclusive political processes. The CPA was a pact between armed movements, not a social contract forged with citizens. As Boyle and Englebert (2008) argue, peace agreements that exclude civil society, women, youth, and traditional leaders fail to generate legitimacy and resilience. This exclusion allowed underlying communal tensions, unresolved justice claims, and institutional voids to resurface violently.

Second, the CPA illustrates the danger of mistaking separatism for structural resolution. While independence ended the North-South war, it did not dismantle the drivers of conflict—resource capture, ethnic polarization, militarized governance, and institutional weakness. Both Sudans inherited and reproduced these dysfunctions, turning post-conflict states into fragmented battlegrounds. Rather than addressing grievances through inclusive reform, elites entrenched themselves through patronage, often along ethnic lines.

Third, the CPA's collapse also stems from the premature withdrawal of international actors. The international community invested heavily in negotiating the CPA and overseeing the 2011 referendum, but failed to maintain long-term engagement afterward. As Dagne (2011) noted, international support must extend beyond symbolic moments into the difficult work of institution-building, mediation, and reform enforcement. In both countries, the absence of sustained external pressure allowed elites to delay or ignore critical benchmarks.

Fourth, the neglect of security sector reform was a fatal oversight. Both countries maintained parallel armed groups and failed to professionalize or integrate their militaries. As Laitin (2001) emphasizes, unreformed militaries not only undermine governance but often become engines of renewed violence. In Sudan, the power struggle between the SAF

and RSF erupted into full-scale civil war; in South Sudan, factionalized armed groups turned independence into an interethnic warzone.

In the end, the CPA must be remembered as both a necessary breakthrough and a cautionary tale. It ended one war but failed to institutionalize peace. It created sovereignty but did not construct legitimacy. It drew new borders but left old wounds open. If future peace efforts in Sudan, South Sudan, or comparable contexts are to succeed, they must move beyond elite-centric designs toward inclusive governance, durable institutions, and holistic approaches that address both historical injustices and contemporary grievances.

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