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THE GOVERNANCE-CONFLICT NEXUS IN THE HORN OF AFRICA: LESSONS FROM SOMALIA AND SUDAN

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Abstract: This study critically examines the intricate and symbiotic relationship between governance failures and the perpetuation of violent conflict in the Horn of Africa, with a focused analysis on Somalia and Sudan. It posits that the nature of the state specifically its institutional architecture, legitimacy, and distributive logic is the primary determinant in either mitigating or fueling large-scale violence. Moving beyond simplistic narratives of ethnic hatred or resource scarcity, the argument centres on how colonial legacies birthed predatory and exclusionary post-colonial states. In Somalia, the complete collapse of central authority created a governance vacuum filled by clan militias and extremist groups, illustrating the perils of a failed state. Conversely, Sudan exemplifies the coercive state, where a hyper-centralized regime in Khartoum systematically marginalized peripheral regions, leading to protracted civil wars and eventual fragmentation. The paper employs a comparative case study methodology to dissect these two distinct manifestations of the governance conflict nexus. It further explores the relevance of conflict management models, arguing that while interest-based negotiation is essential for crafting political settlements, transformative mediation and reconciliation are indispensable for addressing the profound relational and psychological wounds of conflict. The central thesis is that sustainable peace is unattainable without fundamental social and political transformation aimed at constructing inclusive, accountable, and legitimate governance structures. The paper concludes with policy recommendations advocating for a dual-track approach that simultaneously strengthens institutional capacity and fosters grassroots social healing, asserting that technical fixes are futile without confronting the foundational political contracts that govern these societies.

Keywords: *Governance · Conflict · State Collapse · Exclusion · Social Transformation · Horn of Africa · Somalia · Sudan*

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1.0 Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The Horn of Africa has long been a theatre of protracted and devastating conflicts, yet reducing its turmoil to ethnic animosities or competition over scarce resources is deeply misleading. At its root lies a profound crisis of governance. The modern African state remains burdened by a colonial inheritance: an apparatus designed for foreign extraction and control, not for citizen representation or welfare (Bayart, 1993/2019). At independence, many states inherited artificial frontiers that merged divergent ethnic, linguistic, and social communities within political orders unsuited for internal integration and legitimacy. In most cases, post-colonial elites reinforced centralization, elite capture, and exclusionary political orders rather than transforming them.

This governance deficit becomes fertile ground for conflict. Weak institutions are ill-equipped to mediate political competition, address grievances, or ensure equitable resource distribution. In such systems, political power becomes a zero-sum struggle: whoever controls the state wields enormous authority and access to rents, making violence a tempting instrument (Ake, 1996). The challenge intensifies when socio-economic pressures poverty, youth unemployment, and food insecurity generate a pool of disenfranchised actors for whom rebellion is rational (de Waal, 2020; Menkhaus, 2021). The connection between governance and conflict is not merely correlational but often causal and cyclical. Exclusionary governance produces grievances that can escalate into violence, while conflict further erodes institutional capacity, legitimacy, and public trust, reinforcing the so-called “conflict trap” (Collier, 2007). In the Horn, inter-state rivalries, internal fragmentation, and the spread of extremist movements make this nexus particularly acute.

Somalia and Sudan exemplify contrasting, yet complementary, manifestations of this relationship. Somalia’s unraveling after 1991 illustrates the dangers of a total state collapse: as central authority disintegrated, the institutional void was filled by clan militias, alternative justice systems, and extremist groups. Sudan, in contrast, demonstrates how a coercive, exclusionary state can be just as destabilizing: by concentrating power in the centre and repressing peripheries, Khartoum invited resistance, rebellion, and fragmentation. Through a comparative lens, this paper draws lessons from these two cases to reflect on sustainable peacebuilding strategies in fragile contexts.

Part A: The Governance–Conflict Nexus: A Comparative Analysis

1.1 Conceptualizing Governance and Conflict in the African Context

Governance refers to more than the presence of a government; it encompasses the structures, processes, norms, and institutions through which power is exercised, decisions are made, and citizens access voice and resources. The World Bank defines it as “the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development.”

Good governance is typically associated with legitimacy, accountability, transparency, the rule of law, and responsiveness to citizens' needs (World Bank Governance Practice).

In the African setting, essential to this notion is inclusivity: governance must recognize social heterogeneity ethnic, religious, clan as legitimate bases of political identity, and provide mechanisms to manage pluralism (Berman, 1998). Conflict, in this context, arises from contested interests, identities, and values. In African states, conflict rarely takes simple forms: it intertwines structural injustices, identity grievances, territorial claims, and competition over scarce resources. When governance systems fail to provide legitimate, effective outlets for resolving these contestations or are themselves seen as biased, corrupt or exclusionary political tension easily erupts into violent confrontation (Zartman, 1995).

A historical lens helps us see why governance often fails in Africa. Colonial powers drew borders, centralized authority, and institutionalized systems of divide-and-rule with little regard for existing social arrangements. The colonial state was fundamentally extractive and coercive. At independence, African elites inherited a state designed for control, not for representation. Instead of transformation, they often reproduced authoritarian, patronage-based systems that concentrated power and marginalized peripheral communities (Mamdani, 1996). In many post-colonial African settings, the state is not a neutral arbiter but a prize to be captured. Institutions and public resources are weaponized by incumbent elites to suppress rivals and reward clients. This politicization and capture of the state lie at the heart of continuing instability from the Great Lakes region to the Sahel to the Horn. Consequently, governance remains the central fault line in Africa's recurring crises.

1.2 The Mechanisms Linking Governance and Conflict

The pathway from dysfunctional governance to violent conflict operates through several interlocking mechanisms:

Political Exclusion and Marginalization

When core ethnic, religious, or regional groups are systematically barred from power, decision-making, or fair representation, mounting grievances can become mobilizing tools for insurgent movements. Sudan's long-running conflicts North vs. South, Darfur, Nuba stem directly from decades of exclusion by a Khartoum-centered elite (de Waal, 2020).

Resource Mismanagement and Corruption

A narrow ruling coalition often privileges resource extraction for rent accumulation rather than public goods. Corruption and clientelism divert resources from health, education, and infrastructure, fueling inequality and perceptions of injustice. In Somalia, the regime of Siad Barre employed clan-based patronage to distribute oil, ports, and aid, eroding legitimacy and spurring rebellion (Menkhaus, 2021).

Erosion of Institutional Legitimacy

When courts, security forces, civil service, and other institutions are seen as corrupt, partisan or ineffective, citizens lose faith in formal channels of redress. This delegitimization pushes communities toward alternative security structures clan militias, vigilantes, or extremist groups. The rise of Al-Shabaab in Somalia is directly tied to collapsed judicial legitimacy.

Weak or Abusive Security Apparatus

A professional, politically neutral security force is critical for state authority. When state security forces are incompetent or used as instruments of repression, they either fail to contain violence (as in Somalia) or intensify it by oppressing marginalized groups (as in Sudan). In both cases, armed nonstate actors proliferate, and violence becomes normalized.

These mechanisms intertwine: exclusion legitimizes grievance; corruption deepens inequality; institutions lose legitimacy; and security collapse enables violence. The result is a self-reinforcing spiral into conflict.

1.3 Case Study 1: Somalia – Governance in a Vacuum

Somalia's disintegration after the fall of President Siad Barre in 1991 remains one of the most dramatic cases of state collapse in modern African history. Barre's regime initially presented itself as a modernizing, secular authority, but over time transformed into a coercive apparatus that manipulated clan divisions, concentrated power, and violently repressed dissent. Those maneuvers sowed deep inter-clan bitterness and undermined popular legitimacy. When Barre was ousted, the Somali state effectively ceased to exist. The institutions of governance dissolved; central revenue flows collapsed; and no consensus emerged on a successor authority. The vacuum was rapidly filled by warlordism clan-based militias competing for territorial control, strategic resources, and access to foreign aid. Mogadishu became a mosaic of armed enclaves rather than a unified capital.

Amid this chaos, Al-Shabaab emerged. Taking advantage of the absence of central authority and the failure of warlords to deliver stability, Al-Shabaab offered, in contested areas, a harsh but consistent mode of governance under its version of Sharia law. It capitalized on popular disillusionment and security voids. At the same time, localized governance filled gaps. Traditional clan elders, Islamic courts, and customary dispute resolution mechanisms (Xeer) stepped into the breach, restoring a minimal order in many locales. These systems reflected latent capacities for self-organization, but they were fragmented, exclusive, and often uneven in authority and efficacy.

International efforts to rebuild Somalia's state have been slow and fraught. The establishment of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and later the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was heavily supported by external actors (e.g., African Union, UN, donor states). The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) played a central security role. Yet state-building remained precarious: clan rivalries, institutional corruption, reversals by Al-Shabaab, and tensions between the FGS and Federal Member States over resource-sharing and authority continue to destabilize progress (Menkhaus, 2021). Somalia's case shows the perils of reconstructing legitimacy from zero. Without inclusive representation and accountability, formal institutions even when built may be viewed as externally imposed, lacking genuine local consent.

1.4 Case Study 2: Sudan – The Coercive State and Its Discontents

Sudan's post-independence trajectory offers a contrasting narrative: not of absence, but of overbearing, exclusionary centralization. From colonial times, the British employed a system of "native administration" privileging Arabized northern societies while sidestepping southern and marginalized African regions. Post-independence governments carried forward this logic, promoting Arabization and Islamization while neglecting peripheries.

This governance model generated two of Africa's longest-running and deadliest conflicts:

North–South Civil War (1955–2005): Rooted in decades of political and economic marginalization, religious coercion, and denial of autonomy, the conflict claimed millions of lives. It was resolved by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, which allowed for wealth-sharing, power-sharing, and a referendum on independence for the South. Darfur Conflict (since 2003): Rebellion by marginalized non-Arab groups in Darfur was met with a ruthless state response. Khartoum mobilized Arab militias (Janjaweed) to carry out mass atrocities—displacement, killings, and campaigns tantamount to genocidal violence. The Darfur conflict starkly demonstrates how a powerful central state can deploy violence to reinforce exclusionary order.

In 2019, mass protests finally toppled the regime of Omar al-Bashir. The transition that followed, however, was fragile. A shaky power-sharing agreement between civilian and military factions collapsed with the October 2021 coup, and by April 2023 the country descended into open war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). At its core, this is a struggle among regime factions attempting to redefine Sudan's governance structures, but it unfolds within the legacy of a militarized, predatory state system (Young, 2012).

Sudan's experience underscores a lesson: a strong state is not inherently stabilizing. If its structure is built on exclusion, coercion, and extraction, it provokes violent resistance. The overthrow of a dictator is no guarantee of transformation unless the political structures enabling his dominance are fundamentally reformed.

Part B: Conflict Management Models and the Path to Sustainable Peace

2.1 The Imperative of a Social Transformation Perspective

A social transformation approach insists that sustainable peace must go beyond ending overt violence to altering the deep systems, relationships, and logics that produce violence. Drawing on Lederach's vision of peace as relational, the approach holds that technical fixes ceasefires, power-sharing formulas, elite bargains are insufficient without addressing structural injustice, exclusion, and social wounds. In Somalia and Sudan, conflicts are entrenched in historical exclusion and state violence. A transformation lens suggests three intersecting pillars of change:

Structural Reform: Reconfigure political systems to reduce concentration of power—federalism, decentralization, inclusive constitution-making, institutional checks and balances.

Economic Justice: Use redistributive mechanisms and inclusive resource governance to mitigate inequalities that fuel resentment.

Societal Healing: Establish truth-telling, community reconciliation, local dialogues, and symbolic acts of justice to repair relational ruptures.

This perspective does not dismiss negotiation or mediation; rather, it insists they must be embedded in a broader, society-wide transformation agenda. Where peace is reduced to transaction among elites, it is brittle and vulnerable to reversal. Transformation seeks to legitimate peace from the bottom up.

2.2 Conflict Management Models in Practice

2.2.1 Interest-Based Negotiation (Integrative Model)

Interest-based negotiation focuses on identifying underlying needs and concerns rather than entrenched positions, seeking creative solutions that satisfy key interests of all parties (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 2011). In divided states, it enables structured bargaining over power, security, and resource distribution. Sudan Application: The CPA was the result of carefully mediated negotiations among the Government of Sudan and SPLM/A. Mediators (e.g. IGAD) identified core interests of both: South demanded self-determination, institutional recognition, and resource share; Khartoum prioritized unity, security, and control over oil zones. The negotiated framework addressed wealth-sharing, transitional governance, and a referendum mechanism.

Somalia Application: Ongoing constitution-making and federal arrangements between the Federal Government (FGS) and Federal Member States (FMS) constitute interest-based bargaining. Disputes over revenue sharing, security deployment, and electoral frameworks reflect overlapping interests. Fragile trust and overlapping actors complicate the process, causing repeated breakdowns into positional standoffs. While integrative negotiation can produce formal peace frameworks, its limitation lies in its elite focus: it often overlooks deeper relational divisions and local distrust.

2.2.2 Mediation and Reconciliation (Transformative Model)

The transformative model (Bush & Folger, 2005) emphasizes relational change: empowerment and mutual recognition. It seeks to redefine how parties see and relate to each other, not just what they bargain over.

Somalia Application: Traditional conflict resolution (Xeer) and interventions by clan elders/leaders often follow transformative logic. Practices such as oaths (dhaar), compensation (mag), joint restoration (nabsi), and public reconciliation commission rituals aim to rebuild trust between warring clans in communities lacking the state's reach.

Sudan Application: In Darfur and other conflict zones, local reconciliation gatherings judiya organized by native authorities and NGOs bring together ethnic groups to air grievances, negotiate compensation, and create local accords over shared resources (e.g. water rights, grazing). Though limited in scale, they can rebuild relational bridges at grassroots levels.

Transformative approaches strengthen social foundations of peace, but lack the leverage to negotiate national-level bargains or enforce macro commitments by elites.

2.3 A Comparative Analysis: Synergy, Not Substitution

Interest-based negotiation and transformative mediation must be understood not as competing but as complementary modalities. Each tackles a different dimension of peace: the former addresses the technical architecture of state structures; the latter repairs the social substrate of relations between communities.

Interest-based negotiation operates primarily at the macro, top-down level. Its strength lies in structuring political settlements: power-sharing formulas, resource allocations, transitional arrangements, security pacts. The CPA in Sudan remains a landmark instance: it ended decades of war with negotiated terms covering governance, oil revenue, transitional rules, and a referendum on independence. But the CPA's limitation lies in its elite bias: it resolved contestations among signing parties without engaging broader society or addressing underlying distrust and exclusion (Young, 2012).

Conversely, transformative mediation is bottom-up. Its focus is relational: fostering mutual recognition, restoring dignity, and shifting how communities perceive each other. In Somalia, local reconciliation under Xeer or clan elders has resolved many subnational conflicts. In Darfur, judiya forums have enabled local peace pacts over land or water, even amid lingering national strife. These processes build trust, social capital, and norms of coexistence. However, bottom-up processes alone are insufficient to resolve national impasses. A local peace agreement may be overwhelmed by elite-level conflict or state coercion. In Somalia, even stable local pacts collapse when confronted with competition at the federal level. In Sudan, local reconciliation is undermined if national arrangements do not alter exclusionary power structures. The failure to integrate these two approaches accounts for many fragile peace outcomes. For instance, Sudan's CPA lacked a credible nationwide reconciliation component. While it addressed wealth-sharing and governance, it did not cultivate a shared national identity or heal decades of social trauma. When war resumed, the agreement's legitimacy was tested and found wanting (Young, 2012).

In the Somali context, too, federal agreements lacking legitimacy or popular grounding have fragility. Local reconciliation pacts, even when meaningful, do not scale upward into constitutional consensus. Therefore, sustainable peace demands vertical integration: elite-level deals must be nested within broad-based societal engagement and reconciliation. The top-down architecture of peace must be anchored by bottom-up legitimacy. The elite bargains design the political formula; transformative processes produce the social fabric that sustains it. In effect, one provides the structure of peace, the other provides its foundation. Neither is sufficient on its own. Peace as a state of relations requires both: negotiated agreements and healed relationships.

3.0 Conclusion

The divergent tragedies of Somalia and Sudan are not merely expressions of path dependency—they are the consequences of specific governance choices. The governance–conflict nexus teaches

that how a state is organized, who it serves, and how it distributes power fundamentally shapes its prospects for peace or violence. Somalia's descent into statelessness and Sudan's collapse into coercion are two manifestations of a broken social contract.

Thus, technocratic solutions and military interventions, while sometimes necessary, are at best provisional. The only path to sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa lies in deep, courageous transformation rebuilding statehood on foundations of consent, accountability, legitimacy, and inclusion. Real peace requires integrating elite-level negotiation with societal reconciliation: the architecture of political order must be woven together with the threads of relational healing. This agenda is daunting. Yet the alternative a future of perpetual conflict, fractured polities, and human suffering is unacceptable. The governance deficit must not be filled by more predation, but by a new political compact rooted in equality, dignity, and shared belonging.

4.0 Synthesized Lessons and Policy Recommendations

The experiences of Somalia and Sudan though divergent in trajectory converge on core lessons for conflict-prone states: Inclusion is non-negotiable. Peace agreements and governance frameworks that exclude key actors—such as regional factions, civil society organizations, and marginalized communities lack both legitimacy and sustainability. For durable peace to emerge, settlements must be broad-based, inclusive, and rooted in local ownership. Addressing structural causes rather than symptoms is equally fundamental. Military interventions and technocratic reforms may yield short-term stability; however, they fail to resolve deeper challenges related to distributional injustices, political exclusion, and entrenched social inequalities born of protracted conflict. Hybrid governance should also be embraced, particularly in contexts where state institutions are weak or mistrusted. Recognizing and integrating legitimate non-state actors—such as traditional elders, religious leaders, and community councils into formal governance systems enhances legitimacy and strengthens state–society relations. Prioritizing bottom-up reconciliation is indispensable for sustainable peacebuilding. National peace accords must rest on solid foundations of local harmony achieved through sustained investment in community reconciliation, truth-telling, and social healing processes. Lastly, long-term commitment remains essential. Transforming governance structures, social norms, and intercommunal trust constitutes a generational process that demands patience, consistent support, and political will from both domestic and international stakeholders.

Policy Recommendations

For National Governments and Regional Bodies (AU, IGAD):

National governments and regional organizations must prioritize the enforcement of constitutional term limits, the promotion of competitive elections, and the facilitation of peaceful transitions of power. These measures are essential in preventing the concentration and personalization of authority. Institutionalizing inclusive national dialogue platforms should become a routine element of governance, not merely a response to crises. Furthermore, robust security sector reforms are required to professionalize national armed forces and police services, ensuring they are accountable, nonpartisan, and respectful of human rights. Transparent legislation governing

resource allocation and equitable revenue-sharing mechanisms should also be established to mitigate rent-seeking behaviors and reduce regional inequalities that often fuel conflict.

For the International Community:

The international community must broaden its engagement strategies with fragile states beyond narrow counterterrorism objectives to encompass the governance dimensions that underlie conflict and instability. International aid, diplomatic recognition, and financial assistance should be made conditional upon demonstrable progress in governance reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and social inclusivity. Donors should adopt flexible, multi-year funding frameworks that empower local peacebuilding actors—including NGOs, traditional institutions, and community-based organizations—to sustain reconciliation efforts. Moreover, external actors should avoid imposing top-down solutions or uniform policy blueprints. Instead, they should support locally contextualized and participatory approaches that strengthen indigenous capacities and foster local ownership. Ultimately, institutional capacity-building must proceed in tandem with the cultivation of social legitimacy; without a renegotiated political contract, even the most technically capable state structures risk remaining fragile and contested.

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