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NATIONHOOD IN AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
SOUTH SUDAN AND ERITREA THROUGH THE LENS OF
ETHNIC IDENTITY AND GOVERNANCE**

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State Sovereignty, Secession, And The Quest for Nationhood in Africa: A Comparative Analysis of South Sudan and Eritrea Through the Lens of Ethnic Identity and Governance

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study examined the paradox of sovereignty without nationhood in post-secession African states, focusing on South Sudan and Eritrea. It sought to understand how sovereignty, governance systems, and ethnic identity interact to shape peace, stability, and nation-building outcomes following independence.

Methodology: The study employed a qualitative comparative research design based on documentary analysis. Data were drawn from government records, policy documents, and existing scholarly literature. The analysis was guided by theories of nationhood, self-determination, and social

transformation, while thematic analysis was used to identify patterns related to governance, militarisation, and identity politics.

Findings: The findings revealed that both South Sudan and Eritrea possess juridical sovereignty—international recognition without corresponding internal legitimacy. In South Sudan, ethnic fragmentation and elite rivalry weakened national cohesion and fueled recurring conflict. In Eritrea, centralized and militarised authoritarian governance suppressed dissent, substituting coercion for genuine unity. In both cases, sovereignty remained largely symbolic, sustained more by external recognition and force than by inclusive governance or democratic consent.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study advances the understanding that sovereignty alone is insufficient for sustainable peace; it must be accompanied by nationhood grounded in inclusivity, justice, and shared identity. It contributes to theory by linking nationhood deficits to structural insecurity in post-secession states. Practically, it emphasizes the need for institutional reforms, civic education, and conflict transformation approaches. From a policy perspective, it shows the role of regional bodies in supporting inclusive state-building processes.

Keywords: *State sovereignty, secession, nationhood, ethnic identity, governance, South Sudan, Eritrea, postcolonial Africa*

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1. Introduction

A state that is most complex in the contemporary history is the postcolonial African state. African countries achieved independence in the late 1950s and the 1970s, but in this period, they gained not only the administrative structures of their colonial states but also the separation and randomness of colonialist borders (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2020). These divisions tended to ignore the ethnical, cultural and linguistic reality and compelled the various people into single political entities. Therefore, state building in Africa has been characterized by a struggle between the history of the colonial state and the national identity and self-determination. Africa is full of countries that have formal sovereignty but functional fragility, struggling to manage the problem of legitimacy, weak institutions, and conflicts of identity that threaten the very existence of the state.

The concept of the state in political theory refers to a political unit with well-established borders, a population, a state, and capable of making contacts with other. It is the basic component of the international system, as recognized by the international law. A nation refers to a group of individuals who have common identity, culture, language, and history and who tend to want to determine themselves (Edensor, 2020). Nationhood describes an emotional and cultural association that unifies people outside legal and geographical structures, the awareness of shared destiny. The issue of transforming inherited regimes into actual states is a challenge to many African states. Such a transition cannot be achieved without more than sovereignty, but the inclusion, fairness, and common identity of many communities. Sovereignty as one of the key principles of the international relations means the ultimate ability of a state to govern itself without the interference of outside forces (Nunez, 2024). Independence in African countries was celebrated as the greatest symbol of freedom and autonomy with respect to sovereignty. However, decades after, the principle of sovereignty has already been challenged due to domestic conflicts, external influence, and failure of various governments to bring security and growth (Paris, 2020). African countries are usually undermined in respect to their inability to represent the popular will of their citizens. The case of this legitimacy problem demonstrates the weakness of nationhood and the absence of a unified identity, which goes beyond ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations.

In legal and political aspects, secession is the separation of a group of people out of an existing state to form new one. This is commonly justified on the basis of self-determination, particularly in instances where there are certain groups that perceive themselves as being marginalised or suppressed within the parent state (Erez & Banai, 2024). Secession may be viewed as one of the avenues to self-determination and autonomy, but the situation in Africa proves that it can also perpetuate instability. The African Union (AU) that follows the ideal of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to keep the colonial borders intact has never allowed secession, only in extraordinary cases (Andemicael, 2020). However, with new governments such as Eritrea in 1993 and South Sudan in 2011, secession although rare, is still a fact on the continent. These cases represent the emancipation dilemma without stability, when autonomy does not necessarily lead to a calm environment, solidarity, and development.

This contradiction raises critical questions on the nature of statehood and nationhood in Africa. Are the African states real countries or merely artificial inventions of the colonial cartographers? What is the glue holding people within a country together- similar culture, language, desire to have justice and equality? In addition, what is the meaning of security in the African context? Is it just the absence of the conflict, or does it also involve the presence of the social justice, human dignity, and harmonious identity? Such questions not only have a theoretical foundation but also have practical implications of peacebuilding, governance, and social change in postcolonial Africa. Cases in South Sudan and Eritrea are a great source of knowledge on these processes. The two countries achieved independence through the long standing military conflicts which were as a result of ethnic, cultural and identity-based marginalisation. South Sudan became the youngest republic in the world after decades of conflict with the north which is dominated by the Arabs (Young, 2021).

The persistent instability of the post-secession governments such as those of South Sudan and Eritrea underscore the limitations of sovereignty without nationhood. Despite the recognition that these governments have succeeded in achieving internationally, they are faced with the problem of gaining internal cohesion. Initially intended as the means of liberation, ethnic and cultural identities have been changed into the engine of division and conflict (Theron, 2020). Failure to build inclusive governance mechanisms has perpetuated the violence, displacement and mistrust

cycles. The peace and security dilemma in Africa is an issue that is beyond the political, social, and psychological identity and belonging (Kornegay, 2020). This paper has two purposes. This paper will analyze how Africa is correlated with war with the specific case studies of South Sudan and Eritrea as the examples of the political and security trends of state formation in Africa. In this paper, the author will explore the ways that ethnic supremacy, militarism and exclusivity of government structures have caused continual instability. This paper aims to examine how sustainable peace and security can be considered using conflict management techniques through the lens of social transformation of the society to assess the possibility of societies going beyond structural violence to create inclusive and stable societies. Based on the ethnic identity and social change theories, this paper explains the basic causes of fragility in the African governments after secession and offers ways of ensuring permanent peace.

The method is based on the ethnic identity as having a key role to play in understanding the government and conflict. African ethnicity is not necessarily cleavaged but rather becomes controversial when politicized and exploited in pursuit of power and acquisition of resources (Seife, 2022). The social transformation paradigm emphasizes the necessity of a radical change in the society, as well as the expressions of the conflict and structural and cultural foundations of injustice (Siregar & Zulkarnain, 2022). All these frameworks together will give us a better understanding of why post-secession regimes tend to be unstable despite having formal sovereignty in place.

The study argues that geographical dominion or international recognition is not necessarily the true measure of state sovereignty, but the capacity to foster social solidarity, equality, and a democratic government. Therefore, peace and security in Africa must be redefined not just as the lack of war, but as inclusion in nationhood. The cases of South Sudan and Eritrea represent the general African dilemma, which was freedom achieved, and unity delayed. It is crucial to understand this paradox in order to envision a situation in Africa in which the sovereignty is not consistent with genuine nationhood and sustainable peace.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

It is important to understand the complex connection between state sovereignty, nationhood, secession, and ethnic identity in Africa, therefore, an analysis of key theoretical frameworks that explain the existence of political entities, how nations are formed and why peace and stability continue to be a problem in postcolonial environments. In this part, the theories of nationhood and state creation by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Charles Tilly are synthesized; the international law approaches toward secession and the creation of a state are reviewed; the constructivist and instrumentalist views on the ethnicity are tracked down; and the social transformation theory by Johan Galtung and John Paul Lederach are included. These theories offer a critical foundation on the assessment of the impact of colonial legacies, ethnic relationships, and political formation on peace and security in post-secession states in Africa such as South Sudan and Eritrea.

Nationhood and State Sovereignty in Africa

The concept of nationhood in modern political theory is oriented largely towards the concept of imagined communities presented by Benedict Anderson (2006) in which countries are regarded as something social created by the collective view of people as part of the larger whole. According to Anderson, common language, culture and institutional narratives develop this conceptual unity. However, the colonial partitioning that was created by the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885 in Africa disrupted the natural process of nation building. Arbitrary borders created by colonial powers brought together different ethnic and linguistic groups into one administrative unit disregarding the socio-cultural ties that existed (Odigbo et al., 2025). This led to the African countries getting the form of modern governments without a national identity. The lack of collective consciousness continues to erode the legitimacy of the postcolonial state and its ability to foster the development of national unity.

Secession and Self-Determination

The concept of sovereignty and legitimacy in postcolonial Africa is a major topic on the subject of secession and self-determination. The Organization of African Unity (OAU) and then the African Union (AU), both of which support the doctrine of *uti possidetis juris*, emphasizing the

sacrosanctity of inherited colonial borders, have restricted this right in Africa (Stapel, 2022). This ideology was intended to uphold peace and prevent border conflicts but it was also limiting at the same time to the desires of the oppressed individuals seeking autonomy or independence without the inclusion of the exclusionary governments. The principle deprived the traditionally incompatible nationalities of their right to self-determination, they had been mixed into the new states where they formed minorities there. As a result, self-determination tends to be incompatible with the principle of territorial integrity, and they continue to cause tension in the African political arena.

Ethnic Identity and Governance

Africa is a prime example of political structure, wealth sharing and war based on ethnicity. According to Messanga and Nzekaih (2021), instrumentalist theory of ethnicity ideas suggests that identities are not naturalized identities, but rather identities employed intentionally by political elites to amass power. Community allegiances are used by leaders to receive political advantage especially in circumstances where state resources can be accessed through ethnic patronage systems. Such manipulation transforms ethnicity into a political tool, increasing the disparities and perpetuating clientelism which adds to war. In some African countries, power sharing arrangements and formal nomination are usually filled with ethnic identifications over meritocratic principles and continue to promote inequity and discontentment.

Social Transformation Perspective

The traditional approaches to the peacebuilding process tend to focus on political accords, ceasefire, and elite negotiations. The social transformation perspective, which was defined by. In Africa, it is necessary to deconstruct oppressive governments and enhance good governance in order to achieve a significant peace. This perspective questions the concept that peace is imposed by a higher power, pointing to the necessity to engage in an extensive social and institutional transformation that addresses both the root causes of inequality.

The Conflict Transformation Theory by John Paul Lederach (1997) adds to this approach by adding reconciliation, relationship development, and participatory governance to peace efforts. Owujie (2023) insists that the grassroots intervention is the source of enduring peace, and in this

case, communities will be actively involved in rebuilding trust and social networks. In post-secession cases like South Sudan and Eritrea, this strategy has stressed the necessity to go beyond elite power sharing to the grassroots reconciliation and inclusive government. In South Sudan, the key to lasting peace is the ability to enhance the level of inter-ethnic contact and to reinstate trust between peoples. Reform in Eritrea involves breaking down of militaristic systems of government, as well as enabling citizens to participate in the process. The approaches by Galtung and Lederach can be used to understand the route to holistic peace not only based on the cessation of conflict but also on the restoration of justice, inclusivity and a shared sense of national identity.

State Sovereignty, Governance Structures, and Conflict in Africa

The African state after independence exists in the intersection between sovereignty and weakness where nominal power coexists with impotent rule, reduced legitimacy, and incessant warfare. The independence did not bring about major changes in the extractive nature or centralised forms of control of the colonial authority although it introduced political self-governance. Authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, and ethnic patronage have affected government throughout the continent and contributed to the lack of institutional development and stability ((Harnois & Gagnon, 2023). Colonial institutions had been formed to control individuals and to plunder them, instead of encouraging comprehensive development, a justification that continued even after independence. Such historical continuity explains why a number of African governments have a juridical sovereignty under international law but are delicate in reality.

The stability of various systems of rule signifies that sovereignty is not sufficient to offer legitimacy. African countries tend to experience problems in reconciling the legal-rational power of the modern state and the time-tested traditional and local administrative frameworks that define the social life. The ensuing hybrid political systems have deterred the institutionalisation of accountability, the shaping of a sense of nationality and the equal distribution of power (Harnois & Gagnon, 2023). This will then translate into examining the effects of post-independent authoritarianism, neopatrimonialism, ethnic patronage and militarism of government in Africa and their contribution to the war-trap and instability cycles.

Post-Independence Authoritarianism and the Legacy of centralised Power

The repressive and centralised forms of colonial governments were largely reflected in the postcolonial rule in Africa. The colonial state was created not to help people but control and rob them of resources (Young, 2021). African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Jomo Kenyatta adopted similar frameworks in post-independent times by rationalising the need to have centralised government as a way of building the nation and national development. However, the concept of centralisation was quickly destroyed with the idea of authoritarianism, where the ruling elites controlled the process of making decisions and silenced the opposition. The early post-independence state became a gatekeeper state, according to Young (2012) this state is one that controls access to resources and opportunities to the disadvantage of democratic diversity as well as operating within the complexities and prescriptions of a bipolar global order.

Totalitarian governments tended to employ the unity rhetoric to justify oppression on the basis that political rivalry would worsen ethnic hatred and threaten fragile statehood (Theron, 2020). Many countries adopted unitary governments, which fused the ruling party and state, destroying the checks and balances of the state. This led to the individualisation of power and loss of legitimacy. Despite the African governments keeping their international status of sovereign entities, the sovereignty of their countries based on popular consent and institutional efficacy was weak (Stapel, 2022). The examples of the disintegration of the centralised rule, which has torn the sovereignty in Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, illustrate that the collapse of a centralised state can divide countries and worsen the existing internal conflicts.

Neopatrimonialism and the Personalization of Power

Neopatrimonialism gives a very striking model through which one can understand the postcolonial rule. The legal forms of bureaucracy do not disappear in neopatrimonial regimes, and informal groups of supporters and proteges. Political power is not perpetuated through the use of impersonal policies but through the distribution of privileges and resources. This removes the distinction between the office of the state and personal interests, affecting the effectiveness and objectivity of the state institutions and leading to bad economic performance.

There are numerous forms of neopatrimonialism in geographies. The different ethnic elites related to the ruling party of EPRDF in Ethiopia exercised patronage to maintain their authority and turned ethnic federalism into an instrument of control instead of inclusion (Siregar & Zulkarnain, 2022). Eritrea leadership controls power through militaristic favoritism in which loyalty and survival are granted through coercion and dependency (Ogbazghi, 2021). Uganda under Museveni and Rwanda under Kagame set an example of developmental patrimonialism, the economic progress through highly controlled systems of loyalty. Poor institutional capacity and patronisation politics has created the growth of corruption and weak administrative systems in the Sahel, which supported coups and insurrection (Boas, 2021). Neopatrimonialized government, thus, transforms sovereignty into a purchase and sell deal, with personal control taking the place of institutional control.

Ethnic Patronage, Exclusion, and the Politics of Belonging

The ethnicity remains one of the noticeable features of African politics. It serves as a source of identity and political exclusion. The division by ethnicity was further reinforced through colonial governments, which preferred certain communities to others through indirect rule (Seife, 2022). Leaders of post-independence usually continued to support the hierarchies through ethnic favors, allocating state resources and jobs to co-ethnics to cement political alliances (Paris, 2020). In Kenya, land, education and jobs have traditionally been unequally distributed based on ethnic hierarchy that was practiced during the colonial era.

Ethnic patronage became the major division in Post-independence politics in South Sudan. The SPLM fell apart along ethnic lines because the political hostilities between the Dinka and Nuer elites ended in fatal civil war (Owujie, 2023). The adoption of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia institutionalized ethnicity in political system, which fuelled conflicts and bloodshed between regional groups. The continued exclusion of Tuareg and Fulani communities in the Sahel by the state and economic opportunities have triggered frequent insurrections and radicalisation (International Crisis Group, 2021). Ethnic patronage, which puts ethnicity above citizenship, constitutes political rivalry that changes to existential confrontation, charging and authorizing violence as a process of redress.

The Militarization of Governance and Internal Conflict

One of the longest-running legacies of both the liberation movements and colonial histories of Africa is militarisation of politics. A myriad of African countries was a result of militant struggle, when the gun rather than the ballot was the tool of political authority. The liberation forces that fought to liberate nations tended to become the ruling parties, which continued with their system of hierarchy and command under a civilian regime. This created a culture of securitising political power and political authority based on compulsion as opposed to agreement. Nonetheless, and in contrast, today, a number of scholars are considering securitisation of politics and power to be a remedy to the prevailing anarchy and violence in the Sahel. The examples of such leaders include Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea and the late Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia who employed the military in national defense and the domestic surveillance and political control (Tronvoll, 2017; Clapham, 2018). In such systems, military and civilian power are merged and hence the term as Luckham (2020) has brought about based on the merging of the two powers is termed as the militarised governance; a political system where the security institutions take over in making political decisions. The consequence is a phenomenon where political stability is determined by military loyalty and not public legitimacy.

Militarisation of governance entails more than just the actual leadership of the government through the soldiers that involves the large scale application of violence as a political control tool. The military in the Great Lakes region is an adjudicator and participant in politics. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a country where military elites and rebel chiefs control lucrative mining networks to turn war into an economic enterprise and maintain power through violence (Nunez, 2024). The leadership of former liberation organisations in Rwanda and Uganda has led to security states, where stability is sought through the monitoring of the intelligence and repression of opposition (Njuguna, 2023). Militarization brings about a paradox whereby, governments cannot gain immediate security through the use of force, but undermine the long-term legitimacy and institutional growth in the long-term peace.

Sovereignty in Form, Fragility in Function

Although under the international laws, most African governments have a legal sovereignty, most of them face challenges in regard to the exercise of real sovereignty within their borders. When outward recognition hides inward weakness, this is what Englebert and Hummel (2018) refer to as the juridical sovereignty. In such cases, sovereignty is enacted: governments keep the image of power through symbolic institutions and they do not have material and administrative capability to deliver basic services or to ensure security (Herbst, 2020). Corruption, poor bureaucracy and economic clinging to foreign aid further jeopardize the operation of the state. The divorce between structure and content creates a fragile political balance- states exist not because they are legit and effective, but because the international system supports them through diplomatic accolade and monetary aid. Clapham (2021) notes that this type of government is prone to receive external legitimacy over internal consent and cannot withstand domestic pressures and foreign meddling.

This is a weakness in operation as seen in Africa. The lack of firm control over its own sovereignty is shown in the fragmented government in Somalia and the reliance of the country on the foreign peacekeeping forces in the Horn of Africa. Oil dependency and foreign mediation of South Sudan point to the instability of a state that is based on the rentier principles, not on national unity (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2020). The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the case in point that shows how sovereignty is fragmented in terms of territory and functions through the continuation of formal governmental bodies and informal groups in the form of local militias and informal businesses. Jihadist forces in the Sahel have taken advantage of local frustrations and governance failures to establish alternative governments that weaken the authority of the state. These examples explain why Mkandawire (2020) states that true sovereignty should be social-based, that is, based on fairness, inclusiveness, and the equitable distribution of power. By failing to address the root cause of governance failure, African governments run the risk of being trapped in the web of legal sovereignty and practical instability, cyclically moving between effectiveness and simple survival.

2. Case Study 1: South Sudan – Liberation without Stability

Historical Context: From Civil War to Independence

The South Sudan story is the representative of the postcolonial search of self-determination and the difficulties of the multidimensional barriers of building a unitary nation of ethnically disparate peoples. The origins of the war in South Sudan can be linked to the colonial period of rule over Sudan by the British-Egyptian Condominium (1899-1956) as two distinct areas: the Arabized, the economically developed north, and the neglected, poor South. This premeditated divide and rule strategy created deep cultural, religious, and political rifts between the two regions and promoted the long-term hatred (Messanga & Nzekaih, 2021). The north which was mainly Muslim-Arab felt superior and the African-Christian and animist south was being systematically excluded in government and development opportunities. When Sudan gained independence in 1956, the power was centralized among the elites in the north, making the residents of the south ineffective politically and economically, which caused the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972).

The Short-lived peace was achieved in 1972 with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement, which granted regional autonomy to the south but the peace did not last long. In 1983, hostilities were once again fuelled by the unilateral annulment of the accord by President Jaafar Nimeiri and the enactment of Sharia law throughout the state, which became the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). The southern insurrection was initiated by the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) led by John Garang, whose idea was to create the New Sudan a democratic, secular and inclusive political entity (Kornegay, 2020). However, there was very quick internal division over ethnic, ideological lines that weakened the unity of the liberation cause. A key agreement that ended decades of war and offered southern autonomy and the path to the 2011 referendum, at which 98.83% of the population supported secession and independence, was the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005. But independence did not give stability, more grievances, weak institutions and ethnic nationalism cropped up and the young nation entered into an even bigger mess.

Governance and Ethnic Identity: The Dinka–Nuer Divide and Post-Independence Fragility

The political infrastructure in South Sudan was largely affected by the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) after independence because the movement had transitioned to a ruling political movement. The SPLM preserved its military and hierarchical structure with the decisions made by a small group of elites, predominantly Dinkas, and the president Salva Kiir Mayardit. The concentration of power pushed other ethnic communities, particularly, the Nuer community under the leadership of the Vice President, Riek Machar, whose marginalisation was an extension of divisions in the past during the struggle of independence (Harnois & Gagnon, 2023). The current conflict between Kiir and Machar was a good example of deep ethnic and personal hatreds which have existed since the Second Civil War. Instead of fostering inclusion and healing, the post-independence government strengthened ethnic patronage, which increased tensions in the new country.

These governance shortfalls were aggravated by institutional weakness. The former soldiers who lacked administrative capabilities dominated the state machinery leading to rampant corruption at all levels of government. The allocation of resources and appointments was based on ethnic loyalty instead of merit and this weakened trust in government institutions. The military continued to disintegrate on ethnic lines, being a patronage system rather than a professional national security force. This meant that local governments were either disrespected or overshadowed by national governments and this weakened the participation of the grassroots in nation-building. This fusion of ethnic rule, elite rivalry and inadequacy in the institutions created the foundation of the resultant political and social breakdown.

Conflict Analysis: Ethicized Governance and the 2013–2018 Civil War

The outbreak of civil war in December 2013 was a fateful event that altered the post-independence course in South Sudan history. The direct reason was political the allegation of President Kiir that Vice President Machar planned a coup but the root cause was ethnic polarization in SPLM (Johnson, 2016). What started as a political conflict soon turned into ethnic conflict between the predominantly Dinka army of Kiir and the Nuer-supports of Machar. The cities like Juba, Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal turned into battlefields where mass murders, sexual violence and property

damage were the order of the day (International Crisis Group, 2014). Violence caused displacement of more than two million citizens and resulted into great humanitarian crises and famine, disease and insecurity shattered communities around the country.

Another outcome of the war was the ethnicisation of the state institutions and the militarisation of the politics. The SPLA disintegrated into warring groups, with each one mobilising based on ethnicity or being aligned to the local warlords and foreign forces like Sudan and Uganda (Erez & Banai, 2024). The attempts to renew peace were registered by the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) in 2015 and the Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS) in 2018 aimed at covering the power-sharing, security reform, and reconciliation (Erez & Banai, 2024). But the implementation did not work, as there was a lack of mistrust and competition among elites. The resulting unity government that was formed in 2020 was just a temporary reprieve since local conflicts and splinter groups had kept rocking the country. These events show the vulnerability of the peace deals that focus more on elite bargains rather than dealing with structural imbalances and historical issues.

Nationhood Challenge: Fragmented Identity and Weak Legitimacy

The post-independence experience of South Sudan is a classic case of the challenge of building of a coherent national identity in a country that is highly ethnically diverse and has a long history of conflict. Its new nation consists of over sixty ethnic groups, but political loyalty is usually on the tribe level instead of the state level (Cragg & Levin, 2024). Lack of a unified national identity has been a hindrance to social cohesion because communities are still more interested in ethnic solidarity rather than national identity. The condition of this is embedded in the legacy of the liberation movement, which was more concerned with military triumph rather than developing institutions. The death of John Garang left ethnic politics and politicking over elites to take over his vision of a New Sudan. Consequently, the concept of the South Sudan as a common national project is still poor and contentious.

The legitimacy is also undermined by weak governance and inequalities. The inability of the state to provide key services such as security, healthcare, education, and justice has eroded the trust that the citizens had in the government (Andemicael, 2020). The reliance on oil revenues created a

system based on rentier, in which commitment was maintained by dint of patronage and not performance. When the oil production reduced after 2012, the financial base of the government collapsed leading to increased corruption and insecurity. The proliferation of ethnic militias occurred, as local disputes on the land and cattle were joined by the national political struggles (Kindersley and Rolandsen, 2019). The dynamics create violence cycles and increase fragmentation because citizens turn to ethnic militia to protect them instead of state institutions. Thus, the sovereignty of South Sudan is weak, and it survives rather by virtue of outsourcing than insourcing.

Persistent Insecurity and Governance Deficits

The continued lack of security in South Sudan is a symptom and the cause of failure of governance. Inability of the government to uphold law and order and administer justice or safeguard the citizens is a sign of the legitimacy crisis that threatens the very structures of the statehood (Young, 2021). Institutional weaknesses are still being used by armed groups, which are involved in localised violence and resource predation. In a large number of regions, military rule is in place, instead of a civil government. The work of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has brought certain stabilisation, but the peacekeeping efforts are not able to replace political inclusion and reform (UNMISS, 2023). International interventions in the absence of solution to the structural causes of conflict; ethnic marginalisation, corruption and accountability can only bring a semblance of peace and not lasting peace.

Peacebuilding has been predominantly top-down and elite-based and aimed at the short-term settlement of political disputes instead of the real reconciliation (Jok, 2017). Programs like the 2017 National Dialogue were meant to promote inclusivity but the lack of involvement and the mistrust among competing groups has curtailed their success. The timeless message of what took place in South Sudan is that independence in itself does not ensure peace and unity. Unless the liberation movements are turned into accountable, civilian-led governments, and the inclusive governance is encouraged, the secession will run the danger of repeating the same inequalities under a new label.

3. Case Study 2: Eritrea – Sovereignty through Control

The contemporary history of Eritrea is influenced by the longest liberation movement in Africa that lasted three decades of struggles between 1961 and 1991. This struggle can be traced to the complicated colonial and postcolonial developments of the Horn of Africa. Eritrea gained a distinctive political social identity during Italian control (1890-1941), as the country experienced urbanization and the formation of an educated elite. Nationalist feelings that had been cultivated by the British rule (1941-1952) after the World War II were to be later destroyed by the federation with Ethiopia that was brokered by the United Nations in 1952. In 1962, the military struggle began with the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) against the annexation of Eritrea by Emperor Haile Selassie, which was unilateral. After 30 years of warfare, a de facto independent state was created in 1991 and a sovereign State was established in 1993 following a referendum under the oversight of the UN, in which 99.8% of the population voted to separate (Theron, 2020). The hope of freedom was, however, short-lived and became the order of authoritarianism as the same leadership that brought liberation became the order of a leadership that was based on control as opposed to inclusion.

Having gained independence, the EPLF was re-named People's Front of Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) which became the single political party in Eritrea. President Afwerki consolidated his power, oppressed dissent, and militarised the form of governance and transformed Eritrea into a one-party state (Hirt and Mohammad, 2018). A constitution was created in 1997 which was meant to bring about democratic changes but it was not adopted. Rather, it operated by presidential decree and a large security apparatus that was used to stamp out opposition. A self-expressed national security and the spirit of self-reliance by the government were in turn an excuse to practice authoritarianism, which was assisted by a sense of siege mentality that had always placed Eritrea under siege by aggressive neighbours (Stapel, 2022). The main point of this system was the 1994 National Service Program that was initially planned as 18 months of national service, however, it became unlimited conscription. The policy was an effective one that tied citizens to forced labour and was a form of social control. Consequently, Eritrea became a garrison state, which secured its sovereignty not due to civic trust but through coercion.

State control was also strengthened by ethnic and religious homogenisation. Eritrea is officially a country of nine ethnic groups, but the power is still held by the Tigrinya-speaking highlanders, who control the political and military arena (Woldemikael, 2018). The state motto of We are all Eritreans hides the policy of cultural assimilation that violates the minority identities, caused by Muslim and the lowland populations specifically (Habtes, 2019). Since 2002, religious freedoms were also restricted, the government banned most religious organizations that were not registered and persecuted members of independent churches. These repressive actions were enhanced by the 1998/2000 border war with Ethiopia. The state suspended parliament, indefinitely delayed elections under a banner of a national security and arrested journalists and dissenting officials (Hirt, 2015). This militarised nationalism has instilled fear and obedience which has long and well substituted the principles of liberation with continual mobilisation and monitoring.

Relationship Between Governance and Conflict

The governance and conflict of the post-secession states in Africa is informed by the legacies of liberation movements and the difficulty of shifting revolutionary authority to democratic legitimacy. The South Sudan and Eritrea are the prime examples of such dynamic: both of them gained their independence after years of struggle against the repressive regimes, but after becoming independent, the governance became militarised, exclusionary, and authoritarian, which reinstated the same insecurities that liberation was aimed to eliminate. In South Sudan, the Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) retained its armed force and ethnically biased leadership, favouring the Dinka elite at the expense of the Nuer, Equatorians and Shilluk, which led to the outbreak of the civil war of 2013 (Siregar & Zulkarnain, 2022). The successor of the EPLF, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) also united the state with the ruling party, using military discipline, surveillance, and repression to bring people together, so that not a single space was left to political plurality or constitutional governance. Those two cases are the examples of the so-called course of liberation-to-dominance (Clapham, 2017) when the liberation movements are turned into the monopolisers of power and redirect the war-time mechanisms of control into the political consolidation and continue the culture of governing countries with the help of coercive, exclusionist, and distrustful politics instead of inclusive nationhood.

Ethnic Exclusion and Militarization: Reproducing Insecurity

The South Sudanese and Eritrean failures in governance are closely interrelated with the politics of ethnicity and militarisation of the state. Ethnicity has become the major determinant of politics, loyalties, distribution of resources and the division of power in South Sudan. The Sudan people liberation movement (SPLM) was an ethnicity-based movement or faction at war, and after independence, the factions had been transformed into patronage networks. The state resources, positions of security, and political posts were shared under the ethnic identification as opposed to civic citizenship. According to Seife (2022), ethnicity is an expedient approach to common security and struggle over limited resources in those instances when the state is the main source of income and protection.

This dynamic was graphically reflected by the violence in South Sudan in 2013-18. The outbreak of violence in Juba quickly turned into a civil war that was graded on Dinka-Nuer lines that proved the state machinery was taken over through the ethnic power blocs rather than as an impartial mediator (Paris, 2020). This polarisation was worsened by militarisation: the national army (SPLA) was destroyed into ethnically affiliated militias under particular commanders, and the government ceased to be institutionally legitimate and started to occupy territories. Absence of inclusive political structures rendered peace deals such as the one between the Sudan and South Sudan the Agreement to Resolve Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS, 2015) and the rejuvenated version (R-ARCSS, 2018) vulnerable and prone to elite politics and ethnic mistrust.

Militarism in Eritrea is a different but equally harmful kind. The national unity and national control fetish of the regime have cost them constant militarisation through indefinite national service, compulsory conscription, and the creation of an elaborate security apparatus. The state has supported its image of unity through oppression of ethnic and political differences, thereby intensifying the unseen enmity and estrangement. The ethnic and religious minorities, in particular, the Muslim people and those of the lowland people remain systematically oppressed in institutions dominated by Tigrinya elites (Habtes, 2019). Such forceful solidarity makes the state the source and the maintains a state of insecurity. Repression and maintenance of a military society structure is justified by the constant references made by the government to external threats, especially those posed by Ethiopia. Nevertheless, according to Owujie (2023), real peace is not only the absence

of conflict but also the presence of justice, equality and dignity. This approach to Eritrea leads to negative peace, which is stability but not reconciliation that is achieved through the state coercion instead of agreement.

The case of South Sudan and Eritrea shows the inter-relationship between ethnic exclusion and militarism to continue the cycles of instability. In South Sudan, the absence of mediation between ethnic plurality and elite competition causes fragmentation whereas in Eritrea, the variety and civic participation are destroyed by the homogeneity imposed upon the state. In both cases, the substitution of legitimacy by compulsion is done by the state. The result is that both South Sudan and Eritrea contradict each other between weakness and control, respectively, through fragmentation and over-centralisation. Odigbo et al. (2025) state that long-term statehood demands a balance between force and consent, which neither of the two countries has been able to achieve. In such circumstances therefore, sovereignty is performative and not substantive through the exercise of power and not through the promotion of national unity.

Discussion: Nations Without Nationhood

The South Sudan and Eritrea cases allow identifying a long-standing crisis in postcolonial Africa: the development of sovereign states that are not united as a nation. Independence in both nations was attained after prolonged liberation conflicts that promised independence and self-determination but still sovereignty did not necessarily create unity, legitimacy and stable government. The ecstatic feeling of freedom in South Sudan in 2011 was soon replaced by disappointment, as the ruling elite formed by the liberal movement could not easily switch the war-induced unity to inclusive rule (Njuguna, 2023). Ethnic differences especially the Dinka-Nuer were revived through a centralised political system controlled by small patronage groups. A weak government, militarised state, and unequal distribution of resources weakened national identity and trust in the society, making it very symbolic and unable to facilitate genuine nationhood. Likewise, the Eritrea experience since 1993 shows that authoritarian control can be replaced by centralisation and militarised nationalism. With the PFDJ, under the leadership of President Isaias Afwerki, there was conformity at the cost of pluralism and the Tigrinya elite centralised the political power and crushed dissent (Njuguna, 2023). The national unity was mixed with obedience

and this led to the creation of a garrison state where fear was substituted with belonging and identity was used as a weapon instead of collective consciousness.

Such instances show that nationhood cannot be forced by use of coercive means, ethnicity and even militarism. A nation is an imagined community, which is constructed based on a set of shared narratives, values, and institutions that cut across group boundaries. In cases where identity has been misused or when it is used to serve either personal or elite interest by political elites, this kills the trust that was held by the community to maintain national cohesion. Sustainable peace and security entail a re-definition of sovereignty as neither a moral nor a civic project. In the case of South Sudan, this involves the process of converting ethnic politics to civic nationalism, decentralisation of governance and enhancing of local peace structures. Eritrea on the other hand has to break the militarylised power, reinstate pluralism, and promote inclusive politics. Such schemes as the Silencing the Guns of the African Union and the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) emphasize this strategy offering governance that incorporates human security, participation, and reconciliation.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The comparative study of South Sudan and Eritrea emphasizes one of the main paradoxes of postcolonial African statehood: sovereignty without nationhood creates continual insecurity, frailty, and failure of governance. Both countries got political independence although their liberation was not transformed into unification of the countries. The post-independence experience of South Sudan has shown ethnic fragmentation, elite competition and civil war, indicating that institutions are not able to integrate different groups. Eritrea on the other hand centralized state power by militarized authoritarianism, which suppressed pluralism and civil freedoms in the name of national unity. These instances reveal the fact that sovereignty that is limited to formal recognition without legitimacy, inclusivity or institutional capacity is very symbolic and unstable. True nationalism means more than a right over territory; it entails participatory government, civil confidence, and a fair socio-economic growth. The continuous process of sustainable peace development is realized not through the end of conflict, but rather through the inclusion of institutions that bring about reconciliation of diversity, shared identity, and the provision of justice to all citizens.

In order to move towards nationhood and stability, it is necessary to carry out extensive institutional changes that would advance decentralization, accountability, and representation based on ethnic and socio-economic diversity in both countries (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2020). A common national identity should be fostered through civic education and ethnic reconciliation initiatives, and conflict transformation models, which focus more on participatory dialogue and community-based peacebuilding, can work on ingrained hostilities (Messanga & Nzekaih, 2021). The African Union (AU) and IGAD and other regional actors should enhance post-conflict governing support by other means and instruments such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the Silencing the Guns Initiative (Harnois & Gagnon, 2023). Moreover, cross-country studies, which would go beyond Africa, to other regions such as Kosovo and Timor-Leste, will help shed light on whether the sovereignty without nationhood dilemma is a universal one. Finally, the liberation of Africa will not be complete until sovereignty becomes its instilling factor in justice, inclusion, and cohesive nationhood and that symbolic independence becomes a permanent stability and national belonging.

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