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States of disorder

An ecosystems approach to state-building in conflict-affected countries

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Abstract: Why is the recent track record of state-building so poor? Over the past decade, international interventions in Afghanistan, Somalia, Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have not resulted in meaningful improvements in the capacities of those countries to govern effectively and peacefully. In fact, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that in many settings, state-building efforts may have contributed to conflict dynamics. This paper proposes an explanation based on complexity theory, employing an ecosystems lens to explain how systems of governance resist so-called external efforts to transform them into liberal models of the state. Instead of a gradual, linear progression towards improved state institutional capacity, governance systems in settings like South Sudan evolve, often shifting into more violent, predatory, and exclusive patterns of behaviour that undermine the United Nations' core objectives. These raise existential questions for peacebuilding as a practice, and for the United Nations as a protagonist in many of these settings.

Key words: state-building, peacebuilding, complexity, governance, United Nations

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1 Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the West has developed something of an obsession with failed states. Countries suffering from chronic violence, deep poverty, and endemic corruption are ‘the single most important problem for world order’ (Fukuyama 2002: 92), ‘weak links’ (Stewart 2011) in the international system, ‘black holes’ that threaten the rest of the world. (Rotberg 2003: 9) In this narrative, the project of fixing failed states is more than a development concern, it has grown to become a central pillar in Western concepts of world order and global governance.

However, over the past 30 years, there are very few examples of successful international state-building or peacebuilding interventions (see e.g., Paris 2004; Doyle and Sambanis 2006). Despite hundreds of billions of dollars invested in countries like Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Mali, they remain embroiled in conflict, unable to build the kind of effective, legitimate institutions envisaged by interveners. In 2013, the United Nations (UN) was forced to abandon its ambitious state-building project in South Sudan after a new civil war broke out. And most recently, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan signalled an end to a multi-decade attempt to shore up the Afghan state. These experiences support the growing evidence that international interventions are not only unlikely to transform fragile states into strong ones but may in fact work to undermine their overriding goal of improved stability (see e.g., Barnett and Zürcher 2009; Day et al. 2021; Paris and Sisk 2009; von Billerbeck and Tansey 2019). At worst, we may be learning that state-building could be one cause of state failure, rather than its cure (Woodward 2017; Call 2008).

Explanations for the failure of state-building can be broadly categorized into three lines of scholarship. Perhaps the most well-known can be termed the ‘ivory tower’ problem of international intervention. As Severine Autessere has astutely pointed out, international interventions tend to founder due to ignorance of the local conflicts that may drive instability in settings like the DRC (Autessere 2010). At worst, Susan Woodward argues, such interventions do more to bolster the skills of Western intervenors, rather than building local or national capacities (Woodward 2017). Leading a call for a ‘local turn’ in international interventions, authors like Mac Ginty and Richmond have suggested that the shortcomings of peacebuilding can be addressed by better understanding of local dynamics, and indeed an enabling of local conflict resolution capacities (Leonardsson and Rudd 2015; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013).

A second explanation for this failure derives from post-colonial studies, which have illuminated how Western-driven concepts of state-building, peacebuilding, and stabilization all have a strong tendency to impose a European model of statehood and state formation on settings which have a much different history. Pointing to deeply engrained patterns of patronage, violence, and colonial structures, scholars like Bayart, Chabal, and Daloz suggest that the Western project of state-building is very unlikely to take hold in post-colonial settings where the bulk of interventions have occurred over the past 30 years (Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Herbst 2000; Reno 1998; Ayoub 1996). Roland Paris similarly cautioned against a ‘mission civilisatrice’ by the international community, which has continued to push largely European models of the state into post-colonial settings around the world (Paris 2002: 637).

A third and increasingly influential critique of state-building arises in the field of non-state governance. Rather than adopting a Weberian view of governance as residing purely in a state–society relationship, this scholarship explores how a range of non-state actors deliver basic protections, services, and goods to populations, often with a higher degree of legitimacy and effectiveness than the state (Cheng 2018; Hall and Bierstecker 2009; Jackson 2003; Mampilly 2011;

Risse 2013; Rosenau and Czempiel 2010). This view understands governance as an ‘active process’ rather than a set of institutions; governance can be produced by traditional leaders, businesses, chiefs, civil society groups, armed militias, and ordinary citizens (Raeymaekers et al. 2008). Indeed, the growing field of ‘hybrid governance’ suggests that states and non-state actors can compete for, collaborate, and share governance roles in a variety of ways, forming ‘complexes of power’ (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2004), ‘arenas of negotiation’ (Hagmann and Péclard 2010), ‘twilight institutions’ (Lund 2006), and/or ‘negotiated statehood’ (Hagmann and Péclard 2010). Common across these concepts is the understanding that governance is contested and relational, the product of a network of relationships rather than the sole purview of state institutions. The power to govern is, as Alex de Waal writes, the product of negotiation in the political marketplace (de Waal 2016).

This paper expands upon the notions of non-state governance and the political marketplace to offer a more holistic and empirically grounded explanation for the failures of state-building. It argues that governance in these settings is best understood as part of a complex ecosystem, one where change is the result of the evolution of the underlying rules and patterns of the system itself. Taking South Sudan as a paradigmatic case of failed state-building, this paper explores how its system of governance evolved through decades of war to the point of independence in 2011. It argues that the South Sudanese system was dominated by an ethno-military set of relations that grew out of Sudan’s civil war, one where basic security and services for the population were generated via a network of relations that stretched across the rebel army, traditional leaders, and a range of private actors.

The paper further argues that the South Sudanese governance system developed deeply entrenched patterns—feedback loops and strong attractors, to use the language of complexity theory—that allowed it to resist the kind of top-down, institutionally based state-building envisioned by the UN mission and its partners. It concludes that the South Sudanese experience offers insights into all settings where international intervention is attempting to address longstanding conflict dynamics and build more effective state institutional capacities. From DRC to Somalia to Afghanistan, complex ecosystems of governance exist, systems that strongly resist the kind of state-centric approaches typical of the UN and Western actors. By better understanding the rules and patterns that stabilize these systems, we can design more effective approaches in the future.

2 What is complexity theory?

Thinking of the world in complex systemic terms is not new. Pre-Socratic thinkers like Heraclitus viewed the world as composed of a network of relations (Boulton et al. 2015), while Darwin’s theory of evolution was likewise founded on the understanding that change in life forms was the result of patterning variations in complex systems (Bonner 1988). The fields of physics, mathematics, and economics have developed advanced notions of complexity (Boulding 1981; Boulton 2010; Mitchell 2009; Veblen 1898), as has literary criticism (Cilliers 1998; Lyotard 1984).

In straightforward terms, a complex system is one where its constituent elements interact together to create effects different from the sum of what each element would produce on its own. These interactions are *non-linear* and cannot be reduced to input–output models. The systems are *open*—they interact with their environment and are in a state of constant change. And they *self-organize*, often by feeding activities back onto themselves in a way that generates adaptation over time (so-called ‘emergent behaviour’) (Cilliers 1998). It is helpful to think of complex systems as opposed to complicated ones: a car engine may have an enormous number of parts that must be fitted perfectly together, but each part performs a discrete function in a linear input–output manner. A

car engine, like a traditional computer, is *complicated*, not complex. In contrast, our immune system's constituent elements produce something wholly different together than each would on their own; they feed back their activities into the system in a way that allows it to adapt to new conditions and generate outcomes beyond the sum of their parts. Our immune system is complex, as are bee colonies, economies, and, I argue, human societies.

Complex systems may feel chaotic, but they evolve around patterns that stabilize over time. For example: ant colonies organize into structures that appear to demonstrate a 'collective intelligence' capable of building viable structures well beyond their own individual understanding; inter-related patterns of behaviour of neurons in the brain produce thoughts and emotions that go well beyond what each electric impulse generates; and significant research has been directed at economic activity as a complex system with emergent qualities (Mitchell 2009). Adaptation in complex systems is non-linear, but a system's self-organization does follow discernible patterns that can be predicted over time (Chandler 2014). And while systems built of human beings are not always wholly equivalent to those in the natural sciences, the modalities for self-organization are often analogous.¹

One of the most important ways in which systems self-organize is through 'feedback loops'. Simply put, a feedback loop is a way that information is directed back into the system to generate an effect. A positive feedback loop reinforces itself and the pattern in the system: the more people catch the flu in a community, the more will continue to catch it; the more soil erodes, the less vegetation can grow, leading to fewer root structures and greater erosion.² In contrast, a negative feedback loop is best thought of as a corrective: it works against the process that caused it. When humans get hot, the resulting sweat cools us down; as prices in an economy increase, demand tends to decrease and stabilizes the market. In a conflict setting, inter-ethnic animosity can function as a positive feedback loop: tensions increase, the risk of violence between the communities grows, which reinforces enmity between the communities.³ Corruption can also create positive feedback loops: informal networks gain traction and build relationships, undermining formal, state-owned enterprise, stripping it of resources and authority, which in turn strengthens the influence of the illicit actors.

Over time, patterns can entrench themselves, create what are called 'strong attractors' in a given system. Intractable conflicts between two parties offer a good example of this dynamic: each party's thoughts and actions tend to become attached to the idea of the other party as an enemy, thus intensifying the conflict and reinforcing the negative view of the other side (Coleman 2011). Nearly anything the Palestinians do can be seen as provocative to the Israelis, and vice versa, thus reinforcing the negative perceptions of each side. As Peter Coleman has described, 'the attractor serves as a valley in the psychological landscape into which the psychological elements—thoughts, feelings and actions—begin to slide' (Coleman et al. 2011: 42). Once trapped in such a valley, escaping over its steep sides requires the kind of intention and energy that may appear impossible from within the system.

Complexity thinking has enormous implications for state-building. Unlike traditional approaches, which assume that a gradual increase in institutional capacities will lead to a corresponding improvement in stability, a systemic approach suggests that change is generated by some kind of

¹ For a description of agency in complex systems, see Brusset et al. (2017).

² Examples drawn from Meadows (1999).

³ For an application of systemic thinking to inter-ethnic disputes, see Splinter and Wustehube (2011).

rewriting of the underlying rules. Systems evolve by shifting the gravitational pull of the attractors, resulting in new ways for governance powers to be generated, negotiated, and exercised. The system must self-organize differently, finding new patterns around which to stabilize itself (de Coning 2016). In protracted conflicts, this may involve the creation of new narratives that begin to undo the vicious cycles of stigmatization and hatred of the other, or it may require incentives that move actors away from illicit networks that have sustained the system for decades. In some societies, change can happen with surprising rapidity: Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunis in December 2010 and less than one month later protests that became the Arab Spring had snowballed (a term that refers to a rapid positive feedback loop), toppling the Tunisian government and spreading across the region. Similarly, severe shocks to a system can trigger an almost instantaneous leap into a new ‘phase space’ (Richardson 2006) where patterns of behaviour are radically altered, new possibilities rapidly emerge, and the contours of the system may take time to reshape (for example, the stops and starts in Egyptian rule following the Arab Spring).

In contrast, deeply entrenched patterns of behaviour also can persist for generations, suffering apparent reversals before any shift may take hold (see e.g. Vimalarajah 2011). In the DRC, for example, it appears that decades of state-building by the UN have had little effect on the underlying patterns of patronage linking powerbrokers in Kinshasa to the peripheries of the country. A non-linear notion of change ‘requires that interveners have humility, because specific changes are often unpredictable and uncontrollable ... [it] suggests we attend to temporality and trends, not specific outcomes’ (Coleman et al. 2011: 39). Ideas of ‘fixing failed states’ gain little traction here because there is no end-state (de Coning 2018: 312); systems do not ‘break down’—as much of the state failure literature suggests—they reorganize and reach new equilibria, often at great human cost (Rhodes et al. 2011).

Complexity thinking does more than merely challenge traditional notions of linearity; it also offers tools for researchers to map change in socio-political systems (Körppen 2011). Robert Jervis did ground-breaking work applying complexity to political science (Jervis 1997). David Byrne used complexity to understand the impacts of health, education, and urban governance policies in England, while a range of other scholars have suggested complexity-driven approaches to public policy (Byrne 1998; Geyer and Rihani 2010; Moçöl 2011; Rhodes et al. 2011; Room 2010). Michael Woolcock, Duncan Green, Rachel Kleinfeld, and Ben Ramalingam have drawn from complexity thinking to suggest innovative approaches to international development and humanitarian assistance (Green 2013; Kleinfeld 2015; Ramalingam 2013; Woolcock 2009). Bousquet and Curtis have persuasively argued for a more concerted application of complexity thinking to international relations, a call that was taken up by Emilian Kavalski in his analysis of world politics (Bousquet and Curtis 2011; Kavalski 2015). Similar applications of complexity thinking have now been suggested for international policing efforts (Hunt 2015), humanitarian delivery (Ramalingham and Jones 2008), military operations, and studies of social resilience in conflict (Moe and Müller 2017; Richardson et al. 2009). Most relevant, Brusset, de Coning, and Hughes curated an exploratory volume on the potential application of complexity thinking to post-conflict peacebuilding, arguing that external attempts to ‘fix’ local governance systems may ‘undermine and interfere with the self-organising process’ (Brusset et al. 2017: 17).

What is missing, and what this article attempts to offer, is how complexity thinking can be applied in the context of state-building. This is the topic of the following section.

3 State-building from scratch: the case of South Sudan

In July 2011, 40 heads of state gathered in Juba to celebrate the creation of the world's newest country. Standing before a celebrating crowd, President Salva Kiir declared, "The Republic of South Sudan is like a white paper – *tabula rasa!*".⁴ This view was echoed across the international community. President Obama spoke of a 'new dawn'⁵ after a period of darkness, while the World Bank suggested 'South Sudan must build its institutions *from scratch*' (World Bank 2013a). Here, state-building in South Sudan was comparable to filling a void, writing over a blank space where state institutions were utterly absent. Indeed, the newly established UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was given a billion-dollar mandate to fill this institutional vacuum, to constitute and strengthen state governance capacities.⁶ Taking the helm of UNMISS in 2011, Hilde Frafjord Johnson wrote that the UN's task was 'literally building a country' (Johnson 2016: 98).

Only two years later, this optimism about building up South Sudan evaporated as the country descended into a brutal civil war, causing the death of nearly 400,000 people and the displacement of more than four million (Checchi et al. 2018). The nascent army and police were prime actors in this conflict, driving large populations from their homes, killing, looting, and raping civilians, and obstructing humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations.⁷ Recognizing that a complete shift was needed, the UN Security Council quickly halted the state-building mandate of UNMISS, cutting off enormous resources that had been dedicated to supporting state institutions across the country, and calling on UNMISS to focus on protecting the civilians still in harm's way.⁸ In only a few months, the UN had pivoted from the role of building the state to one of protecting the people from it. State-building had failed.

The remarkable apparent takeaway within the international community was that South Sudan had suffered from *too little* state-building. Special Representative of the Secretary-General Johnson suggested that capacity development of the South Sudanese state had been conducted in a 'patchy and uncoordinated' manner, 'not done in the comprehensive and systematic way needed to build a functioning state' (Johnson 2016). The World Bank reported that dysfunction and corruption within the state meant that public expenditures had not delivered the kind of institutions needed to prevent the war (Adiebo et al. 2013). Capturing a sentiment held across many in the donor community, Richard Dowden suggested that South Sudan had become independent too early, before the international community was able to help it build effective state institutions that would be resilient in the face of ethnic divisions (Dowden 2014). If the problem was poorly functioning state governance, then the solution should have been to invest more in the state.

This paper offers an alternative—and in some ways directly opposed—explanation of the failure of state-building in South Sudan. Its central argument is that governance in South Sudan is best

⁴ President Salva Kiir's Martyr's Day Speech, 30 July 2011 (Salva Kiir 2011).

⁵ Statement of President Barack Obama on Recognition of the Republic of South Sudan, 9 July 2011 (White House 2011). See also Statement of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on the Independence of the Republic of South Sudan (United Nations 2011).

⁶ United Nations Security Council Resolution on South Sudan, S/RES/1996 (8 July 2011), para. 3.

⁷ Letter dated 20 November 2017 from the Panel of Experts on South Sudan addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2017/979.

⁸ United Nations Security Council resolution, S/RES/2155 (2014).

understood as an ecosystem, a set of relations across actors that evolved over the course of the 20-year civil war with Khartoum. This system exhibits ‘strong attractors’, deeply entrenched patterns that create powerful tendencies and tend to stabilize the system over time (Coleman et al. 2007). In the case of South Sudan, the strongest attractor was what I term an ‘ethno-military’ network composed of the former rebel army (the Southern People’s Liberation Army (SPLA)), traditional leaders, and powerbrokers in Juba, which over time was able to absorb extraordinary shocks and continue on. The patterns underlying this system, I argue, meant that energy and resources directed towards state institutions were pulled in other directions, captured by the gravitational pull of the system, even when it appeared that South Sudan was making progress.

3.1 The evolution of South Sudan’s governance system

The South Sudanese governance system in 2011 was in large part the outcome of the structures put in place during the colonial period and their evolution through 20 years of brutal civil war against Khartoum.⁹ Anglo-Egyptian rule was based in large part upon a form of ‘native administration’ in which traditional leaders in southern Sudan were recognized as legitimate state authorities, able to levy taxes and impose rules upon their communities. At the same time, traditional authorities (chiefs, mainly) continued to govern via their own long-established structures, which were largely based on kinship and ethnic identity.

The result was a system in which urban areas (themselves created to support the slave trade) became nodes in an extractive governance system that fed the political centre in Khartoum/Omdurman. As Cherry Leonardi describes, towns became the place where the mediation role of the chief played out:

[A] whole range of people in and around the towns have made claims upon the state and/or their chief, often employing notions of a contract, transaction or reciprocal deal to demand guarantees of their rights in property or persons. In its most basic expression ... this was a bargain of protection from the threat of the same state from which the guarantee was obtained (Leonardi 2013: 3).

As a result of the colonial instrumentalization of local customary roles, wealth and administrative authority were inextricably linked to the ethnic affiliation of the traditional leader. Access to resources was negotiated as between a community and the colonial power through the intermediary of the traditional authority, who maintained local legitimacy through kinship. As Volker Boege has pointed out in other settings, traditional leaders had to ‘adopt an ambiguous position with regard to the state, appropriate state functions and “state talk”, but at the same time pursu[e] their own agenda under the guise of state authority and power’ (Boege et al. 2008).

Following independence in 1956, Sudan’s trajectory was largely shaped by two civil wars. In simplified terms, the wars arose out of attempts by Khartoum to assimilate and control its southern territory, making it economically dependent on the centre, while the southern population fought for greater autonomy. Indeed, at the close of the first civil war in 1972, a key aspect of the Addis Ababa agreement was to give southern Sudan greater executive and legislative powers and political representation in Khartoum. However, economic dependence on Khartoum was maintained by keeping a strong hold on revenues and only transferring funds to the south via government positions. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century, the most reliable way for a southerner to attract resources from Khartoum was not through any national budgetary process, but rather by

⁹ Indeed, one could trace these structures back further to the Turco-Egyptian and Mahdiyya regimes, as I do in a forthcoming book, *States of Disorder, Ecosystems of Governance: Complexity Theory and UN Statebuilding* (Day forthcoming).

obtaining a government post. Up to 96 per cent of government expenditures in southern Sudan at the time went on government salaries and wages, creating a highly dependent and ethnically stratified set of relationships governing the south.

As a result, local government positions—distributed along traditional kinship lines—were the exclusive recipients of resources from the centre, creating what Edward Thomas has called the ‘ethnic homogeneity of administrative units’ given their strong tendencies to distribute resources within their own communities (Boege et al. 2008: 131). When Khartoum experienced economic downturns, the government transmitted the costs first and foremost southwards, increasing southern dependency on the north over time. For example, as late as 2003, peripheral dependency on the centre was still increasing, even as the southern government had created apparently independent governance capacities across the southern territory (IMF 2012).

Sudan’s second civil war (1983–2005) witnessed a militarization of these structures. Leading the rebellion, the Southern People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) gradually took over all major governance functions, subordinating the role of traditional authorities to the war effort. However, from birth, the SPLA considered itself a movement aspiring to alter how Sudan was governed as a whole, not as a future government of a southern Sudanese state. In fact, prior to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) period in 2005, it never set up the kind of shadow ministries or provisional government structures typical to an autonomous region, but instead largely assumed the structures of the Anglo-Egyptian native administration (IMF 2012). Traditional chieftaincies continued to be recognized as the custodians of customary law within communities, and they were expected to perform state-like activities such as tax collection and infrastructural projects on behalf of the SPLA. But customary authorities were subjected to the military exigencies of the movement in a variety of ways: SPLA officers often played a supervisory role over the chiefs, including the selection of chieftaincies; in rural areas SPLA commanders carved out fiefdoms where they overruled community leadership and extracted resources; and rural communities were forced to contribute to SPLA upkeep via taxes in kind, such as grains, livestock, and cattle (Pinaud 2014).

The SPLA’s governance role created a symbiotic relationship between the rebel group and the communities, mediated by traditional authorities.¹⁰ On the one hand, the SPLA gained material resources—food, shelter, recruits, and different forms of rent—from their territorial control of many parts of southern Sudan. Operating in concert with traditional authorities allowed the SPLA to maintain some degrees of legitimacy within communities; there were even instances where traditional authorities were given SPLA military ranks to ensure compliance and guarantee that SPLA presence was seen as part of the community governance structure (Podder 2014). The ethno-military aspect of the SPLA allowed it to provide to its communities as well: because the network was maintained along ethnic lines, the SPLA was seen as a protector of community interests, directing land, natural resources, and representation at the centre in favour of the community in which they were deployed. Here, traditional chiefs were a mediation point, articulating community needs and demands upwards, while expressing the SPLA’s power downwards. This symbiotic relationship operates as a strong pattern that became even more entrenched during and after the CPA period.

An important outcome of the militarization of the governance system in southern Sudan was the lack of attention to economic development in the region. Roads, government offices, communications, and basic services, none of which was particularly well delivered at any point in

¹⁰ For an in-depth use of symbiotic relations in peacebuilding, see Hunt (2017).

the South's history, fell into further disrepair. 'The nucleus of the political system', Sukanya Podder writes, 'was confined to garrison towns ... while the rural areas served as the base for planning and launching war operations' (Podder 2014:213). As chieftaincy structures were incorporated into the SPLA's military chain of command in these garrison towns—and indeed as the SPLA took on a more direct role in appointing chieftaincy positions—local governance was redirected in support of the rebellion rather than providing for the communities of the region. Resource flows reflected this dynamic as communities received very little in exchange for the food, taxes, and resources provided to the SPLA (LeRiche 2018).

The SPLA's failure to govern effectively or fairly is one of the most cited reasons for the series of splits and infighting that characterized southern dynamics in the civil war from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. Anne Walraet's research has shown that a combination of predatory practices of the SPLA—including its forcible takeover of lucrative agricultural resources, forced taxation, and looting—deepened distrust and fomented rebellions within the South (Walraet 2008). Stripped of the means to govern effectively other than by the authority vested in them by the SPLA, local governors and chiefs were thus caught between their roles as representatives of the communities and recipients of patronage from above. Cherry Leonardi describes this role in bargaining terms, where people in and around towns in southern Sudan entered into deals with chiefs to secure guarantees around land rights and also protection from predation by the state itself (Leonardi 2013).

Here, it is important to highlight the nexus between the economic and the security aspects of governance in southern Sudan, as it demonstrates early patterns that later became the country's deeply entrenched patronage network. As noted above, the SPLA largely assumed the Anglo-Egyptian structures of customary authorities but placed chieftaincies within the SPLA's military chain of command. This meant that traditional mechanisms of governance were repurposed for war aims, allowing for high degrees of predation and abuse by the SPLA, especially in rural areas. But it also led the SPLM/A leadership to use the military network across southern Sudan to maintain coherence in the face of splits, rebellions, and mutinies by communities during the war with Khartoum.

This coherence was achieved, in blunt terms, by purchasing loyalty: Faced with divisions and rebellions by southern communities, SPLM leader John Garang tended to offer integration into the SPLA and/or leadership positions within the movement, where a secure paycheck hedged against future disloyalty. Given that Khartoum's principal method for weakening the rebellion was to foment discord within the SPLA, preventing the collapse of the group was often Garang's overriding strategic objective. As Matthew LeRiche notes, 'managing the political economy of factional dynamics in the region became the main vehicle through which Garang and many of his commanders conducted the war' (LeRiche 2018: 22) The military chain of command, laid over the traditional authority structures from the colonial era, thus became the conduit to maintain the communities of southern Sudan in a unified fight against the north.

This meant that communities wishing to express dissatisfaction with the SPLM/A found that the most expedient act was armed rebellion. Groups capable of threatening the SPLM/A leadership with violence could establish a bargaining position, extract concessions for ending their uprising, and create new economic opportunities for their communities. Those without the ability to confront the military strength of the SPLA were either quashed or ignored. Major insurrections—such as the uprising of the Nasir faction in 1991—not only exhibited the willingness of Khartoum to instrumentalize ethnic divisions within the South but also presaged a sort of continual disintegration and reintegration of the SPLM/A over decades, including through the CPA period. Dozens of insurrections appeared across southern Sudan, with some commanders defecting so

frequently it became a joke in Juba trying to count the number of rebellions by a single leader.¹¹ As John Garang himself wrote, ‘the marginal cost of rebellion in the South became very small, zero to negative; that is, in the South it pays to rebel’ (Ali et al. 2005: 193).

However, as Matthew LeRiche’s authoritative study on factionalism in southern Sudan has uncovered, the continual process of fracturing and reconstituting the SPLA was not a purely military venture. LeRiche found that the levels of violence did not determine whether a rebellion would be rewarded with an integration deal; instead, it was the combination of some military threat along with a high degree of political authority that created bargaining position (LeRiche 2018). This points to one of the dominant patterns that emerged through the SPLA’s role in governance: southern communities expressed their political needs militarily. Describing a dynamic that spans the periods before and after the CPA, LeRiche writes:

Governance in South Sudan is a continual process of negotiating, brokering and mediating between a wide range of leaders and between communities, many of whom have well-armed followers that either are, or could be, a threat to the state, at least in a localized area. (LeRiche 2018: 38)

Here, governance is expressed, not merely as a relationship in which legitimacy is exchanged for protections and services, but as a mode of survival. In order to resist the attempts of Khartoum to fracture the SPLM/A along ethnic lines, its leadership continually brokered deals with communities via military integration. With its leaders integrated into the SPLA, a community could be assured of basic protections (though also subjected to the predations of the troops) while disenfranchised communities would rebel in the hope of gaining more resources via the next integration deal.

The outcome of the continual disintegration and reintegration of the SPLA was the growth of a patronage network expressed through the military chain of command, layered over existing traditional governance structures. Here, the mode of negotiation between communities and the SPLA was insurrection, where bargains were struck in accordance with the political and military threat posed by a local leader. Largesse was dispensed militarily, in the form of integration deals that included the right to SPLA command positions over specific territories. As Sukanya Podder notes, a form of ‘wartime governance’ arose during this period, privileging and legitimizing the rebel SPLA in ways that allowed it to permeate the social and economic spheres of southern Sudan, becoming what Clémence Pinaud has called a ‘military aristocracy’ in the South (Podder 2014).

3.2 Cash floods the system

In 2005, the SPLM and the Sudanese government signed the CPA, ending 20 years of civil war and bringing to a close nearly 50 consecutive years of war in Sudan. Overnight, the SPLM became a recognized regional government within Sudan, given significant legislative and judicial autonomy and the rights to 50 per cent of the oil revenues generated from southern Sudan (United States Institute of Peace n.d.). This arrangement resulted in a staggering influx of cash to the region, both in the form of oil revenues and development support. In the year following the 2005 CPA, Juba’s annual budget jumped one hundredfold, from US\$14.5 million to US\$1.3 billion, as the south received roughly half of the US\$100 million per month in oil revenues (Shankleman 2011). However, rather than helping to build more viable state institutions or transforming the rebel group into a liberal governing structure, this flood of cash tended to strengthen the existing ethno-

¹¹ In 2010, for instance, the commander Peter Gatdet had defected more than a dozen times, each time receiving a reintegration deal back into the SPLA.

military network. The result was a southern government synonymous (quite literally) with the rebel force that had fought for 20 years, a ruling SPLM/A that deployed its new administrative authority into a sprawling patronage system.

The most obvious example of this dynamic was the southern security forces, which received the bulk of the new revenues (Biong and Kuol 2019). Military wages made up nearly 70 per cent of government salaries, with soldiers receiving roughly US\$150 per month, much more than neighbouring countries with similar budgets (Biong and Kuol 2019). These enormous outlays were in part driven by dramatic increases in oil production from the 1990s through the early 2000s, but also a concern within the SPLM leadership that a robust military was the best hedge against renewed confrontation with Khartoum (Patey 2010; Shankleman 2011). In 2006, SPLM eagerness to pour resources into wages meant that it actually overspent its annual revenues by more than US\$200 million (Overseas Development Institute 2010). This fiscal policy, violating every accepted norm for dealing with resource windfalls (van der Ploeg and Venables 2001), was a stark demonstration of the SPLM's overriding priority on its own military strength and its use of military structures to maintain loyalty across South Sudan.

Governance via ethno-military networks aligns with what Alex de Waal has called 'the hegemonic power of the SPLM-SPLA patronage-coercion nexus' (de Waal 2014: 349). This network was formed by a pattern of exchange: loyalty to the SPLM in return for rents that could be extracted from communities as a member of the SPLA. However, the system did not just run on cash: ethnicity was a crucial currency that also flowed through it, shoring up relationships when money was short. Ethnicity was the means for the patronage network to extend from the urban centres to the largely cashless hinterlands.¹² 'Tribalizing' issues was a cheap way to ensure loyalty, as evidenced by the widespread practice of SPLA soldiers marrying within the families of their chain of command (Pinaud 2014). For example, when SPLA General Paulino Matiep died, his 47 wives and 102 children were not just a sign of his status and wealth within South Sudan but also a network of soldiers and loyalists with a clear function in the southern governance system (Sudan Tribune 2012).

Spending on the SPLA meant that the army tended to co-opt all other forms of governance, as it had done to sustain itself during the civil war. While the 2005 interim constitution (and indeed the 2009 Local Act) gave formal powers to traditional leaders and community chiefs (Leonardi 2013), these legal measures were easily disregarded by an SPLA (Branch and Mampilly 2005). Instead, the distribution of southern revenues via ethno-military networks rather than institutionalized administrative authorities created a heavily dependent periphery within the governance system of South Sudan. Stripped of any capacity to meaningfully collect taxes, and without funding from the centre, local institutions beyond the major towns relied almost entirely on Juba for their existence and communicated those needs through the SPLA. According to the World Bank, most southern counties could meet less than 20 per cent of their budgets from their own tax revenues, while the SPLA stepped in to take local roles of administering land and cattle markets (Thomas 2015; World Bank 2010).

The result was a reinforcing (positive) feedback loop within the governance system of South Sudan: during the early years of the CPA period, the states' formal ability to generate revenue actually declined, making them less able to develop institutional infrastructure or maintain staff, leading to a further decline in their revenue generation (IMF 2012). Consequently, the formal state structures were only somewhat involved in the distribution of power and resources across South

¹² Pendle and Anei (2018) (noting that the patronage network grew weaker as it extended beyond urban centres).

Sudan, more like rocks in a stream dampened by the flows around them but unable to influence the current. Meanwhile, the SPLA absorbed nearly all of the oil revenues, strengthening the ethno-military network that had evolved through the civil war.

However, by maintaining the ethno-military network, southern resources were never channelled into administrative institutions (Lacher 2012). The SPLM fed cash into their personal and community networks, often using government sinecures to ensure the dominance of their own ethnic group in local government. In places like Upper Nile State, salaries for state security services approached 80 per cent of the state budget, while funding for formal administrative structures in those locations hovered close to zero (Lacher 2012). The result was an empty shell of state government at the county and local level. In 2007, 15 government institutions representing 80 per cent of the government's payroll at the time could present no records of their staff (Johnson 2016). By the end of the interim period in 2011, half of the statutory positions within ministries of South Sudan still had not been filled, while the region ranked near or at the bottom of every governance indicator worldwide (Johnson 2016; Mores 2013).

3.3 UNMISS in the South Sudanese ecosystem

While the 2011 independence of South Sudan was a major turning point for the world's newest country, the dynamics on the ground actually changed very little. Deeply entrenched ethno-military patronage remained the dominant governance system, even while the South Sudanese government spoke in increasingly liberal, Western terms about their own leadership of the country. As I briefly describe here, the UN's support to the South Sudanese state, if anything, appeared to bolster some of the more dangerous aspects of the underlying governance system.

The Government of South Sudan's discourse resonated well with UNMISS. For example, the government-led South Sudan Development Plan for 2011–13 articulated state-building goals in an uncannily similar way to the UN and major donors. Referring to itself as 'the nation's response to core development and state-building challenges', the plan described good governance as a key priority and allocated 25 per cent of the annual budget to building state capacity across the country (Government of the Republic of South Sudan 2011). This, however, is best understood as a form of 'isomorphic mimicry' in which state actors adopt the forms of traditional state structures while actually pursuing different objectives (Larson et al. 2013). By speaking in the same terms as international partners, the government was able to 'tick the boxes' (Snowden 2012: 16) for international donors and secure continued support, while the actual resources and political energy were directed elsewhere. In fact, the government appeared to maintain a 'fake ministry' that dealt with international actors and reported on progress according to the development plan, while the 'real ministry' funnelled resources elsewhere (Larson et al. 2013). This resulted in extraordinary revelations of corruption. In 2012, President Kiir sent an open letter to 75 of his current and former ministers demanding that they return roughly US\$4 billion that was 'unaccounted for or, simply put, stolen' (Aleu 2011). But one should not merely think of this as large-scale graft (though it was also that); instead, as I have described above, the 'real ministries' were part of the ethno-military network in South Sudan. So-called 'corruption' was the system of governance persisting and evolving to new inputs.

A good example of this dynamic was UNMISS's support to extension of state authority in the peripheries of the country. UNMISS was mandated to help to build institutional capacities beyond the major urban areas, including by improving the state's rule of law capacities across the country. The mission deployed 900 police to the ten states of South Sudan with a mandate to train the state's security services, dedicating a majority of its civilian resources to capacity-building. Here, the government's development plan aligned almost flawlessly with UNMISS, laying out a decentralization of resources to build state institutions. However, in practice, South Sudanese

resources were directed into salaries for SPLA commanders that were supporting their respective communities (South Sudan Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011). In fact, rather than a distribution of funds across other administrative functions, there was a *rise* in salaries to the SPLA in the immediate post-independence period, alongside cuts to fiscal transfers to other state institutions (de Waal 2014). To the extent they received any resources at all, decentralized administrative structures ‘function[ed] above all as patronage instruments’, rather than meaningful efforts to establish institutions in the peripheries (Lacher 2012: 349).

There was a mismatch between what UNMISS appeared to be supporting (extension of state authority and increase in formal governance capacities) and reality. In fact, by pouring resources and political legitimacy toward state institutions, UNMISS appeared to reinforce the top-down, centre–periphery dynamic in which the Dinka-dominated SPLA was the primary benefactor. ‘UNMISS put its finger on the scales, it only helped the Dinka. That’s what capacity development means to us’, one South Sudanese expert told me.¹³ In speaking to dozens of South Sudanese, I often heard the view that UNMISS’s capacity-building work from 2011 to 2013 was directed at a government controlled by President Kiir (a Dinka) and employed in the service of shoring up Dinka interests across South Sudan.¹⁴ Others have similarly noted that external efforts to reform the political structures of South Sudan appeared to result in the ‘progressive consolidation of an elite-centred and Dinka-dominated decision-making structure that remains top-down and personality driven’ (Podder 2014: 7).

A similar form of isomorphic mimicry took place in the arena of security sector reform (SSR), which was a key objective for UNMISS. The mission planned to help reduce the size of the army by 80,000 troops during the post-independence period, offering training for up to 150,000 demobilized soldiers to return to civilian life (UNMISS 2014). This work aligned with the government’s own SSR plan (DFID 2012), which was budgeted at US\$1.3 billion (Snowden 2012). Incredibly, UNMISS predicted that the security sector could be reformed extremely quickly; in its 2011–12 budget, the mission suggested that within three years resources for SSR were likely to be no longer needed.¹⁵

On paper, the government made real progress towards the central goals of SSR during its first two years. A DFID study found that between 2011 and 2013, indicators of progress included: the government’s passage of a draft National Security Plan; a Training Strategy under which the SPLA conducted its own basic military training; a logistics capacity for the army; and an IT training facility (DFID 2012). On the police side, hundreds of trainings for newly recruited police suggested that internal security might shift away from the army to the police, while newly passed legislation on the security sector indicated that South Sudan might be moving in a positive direction.¹⁶ UNMISS regularly reported on its support to these reforms, placing emphasis on their role in building a viable state.¹⁷

¹³ Interview with head of South Sudanese NGO, Juba, 13 December 2018.

¹⁴ Interviews, Juba, 1–15 December 2018.

¹⁵ Budget for the United Nations Mission in South Sudan for the period from 1 July 2011 to 30 June 2012: report of the Secretary-General, A/66/532 (2011), para 14.

¹⁶ ‘Rule of Law and Security Institutions Support’, United Nations Mission in South Sudan, UNMISS, 1 July 2014.

¹⁷ Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on the situation in South Sudan, S/2012/486 (2012), paras 71-73; Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on the situation in South Sudan, S/2013/140 (2013), para 58. Not all were so positive, see, e.g. Malan and Hunt (2014).

However, this apparent progress towards the stated goals of both UNMISS and the government belied the actual trajectory of the security services in South Sudan, which continued to rely on an ethnically driven patronage system. In fact, instead of shrinking the army in line with established plans, SPLA ranks actually swelled before and immediately following independence (de Waal 2017; Weber 2013). In Unity State, for example, the SPLA conscripted roughly 7,000 new recruits following independence (Snowden 2012). Promotion of dozens of new major and brigadier generals added to the already top-heavy structure of the national army at a time when the government was publicly calling for massive reductions in support of its SSR plan (Rands 2012).

By 2013, the World Bank estimated that the SPLA and southern militias accounted for more than 300,000 troops, a near doubling of the figure during the CPA period (World Bank 2013b). The creation of the South Sudan National Police Service offered further evidence that SSR was not resulting in a transformation from the existing system: dramatically underfunded and clearly unable to replace the army as the providers of internal security, the newly-formed police was only really notable for its overwhelmingly Dinka leadership (Snowden 2012). Other evidence, such as the deployment of the SPLA across the entire territory of South Sudan rather than areas of most acute violence, pointed to the inescapable conclusion that the security services remained what they had been for decades: a means to ensure that the centre could generate the loyalty of the periphery.

3.4 A systemic explanation

When South Sudan descended into its own civil war in 2013, there was widespread hand wringing about the failure of the state-building project. UN leadership suggested not enough resources had been given to the new state; donors lamented a lack of coordination amongst efforts; everyone blamed the South Sudanese leadership for corruption and infighting. These explanations offer only a small part of the story. Thinking in systemic terms, however, we can see that governance in South Sudan had come to depend on the SPLA as the conduit for influence from the centre to the periphery. Integration into the SPLA was the way in which Juba addressed potential rifts in its network, meaning that efforts to downsize the army ran against well-established patterns that acted to stabilize the system. Equally, efforts to build independent state institutions across the country threatened to destabilize the highly effective network of relations that depended upon the SPLA to secure rights and resources to various communities. As South Sudan underwent successive shocks to its system—in particular the 2012 oil shut-off—reliance on the SPLA to hold the network together became even more urgent. Austerity was passed on to the formal institutions, not the SPLA network; generals were promoted rather than retired; patterns of purchasing loyalty proved too deep to be overcome by superficial legislation and occasional training regimes (Snowden 2012).

If anything, these dynamics demonstrate that UNMISS's state-building may have bolstered the more dangerous elements of the underlying governance system in South Sudan. The combination of a Juba-focused, legislatively driven attempt to build formal institutions appeared to contribute to what Sukanya Podder has called 'the progressive consolidation of an elite-centred and Dinka-dominated decision-making', and an embedding of the elite's dependence upon the SPLA to maintain its web of control (Podder 2014: 216). In dozens of interviews conducted with South Sudanese—including former government officials and members of civil society—I heard a consistent theme around the topic of national reform and state-building: UN support to the government ran with the grain of patronage, not against it, offering resources and political support that were channelled into the existing network rather than changing how it functioned (Day 2019).

‘There was no ‘reform’ in SSR’, one expert told me, ‘only more money for Kiir to pay his commanders’.¹⁸

4 Conclusion

This paper is not meant to offer a comprehensive application of complexity thinking to UN state-building but is instead designed to show the promise of a systemic approach to settings like South Sudan. While many scholars have astutely pointed to the shortcomings of UN-led efforts in fragile settings, these have tended to focus on lack of resources, poor coordination, and isolation from local dynamics. These are all valid criticisms of the UN, but they do not offer a way forward. As the above mini-case study demonstrates, fixing all of these faults would not have solved the South Sudanese challenge. The UN could have had far more resources, could have coordinated flawlessly across donors, and could have had a granular understanding of local conflict dynamics (indeed, many of the UN staff I met did have such an understanding). But none of that would have addressed the reality in South Sudan, the presence of a deeply interconnected, highly adaptive system of governance that stretched across the rebel army, traditional leaders, and powerbrokers in Juba. This system proved capable of adapting to new inputs, able to evolve around its strongest attractors—a resilient network that had sustained the region through decades of war.

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¹⁸ Interview with senior member of South Sudanese think tank, Juba, 13 December 2018.

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