

Political Parties' Adoptive Strategies in Response to Political Dominance in South Sudan

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Abstract

This paper examines the adaptive strategies adopted by political parties in response to political dominance in post-conflict South Sudan. The study is guided by the pragmatic philosophical paradigm and employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the adaptive strategies of political parties in the post-conflict context of South Sudan. The target population comprised 384 respondents. Of these, a sample of 257 respondents (67.0%) completed questionnaires, while an additional 100 respondents (19.0%) participated in focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). The findings on the adaptive strategies adopted by political parties in response to political dominance yielded an overall mean score of 3.04, suggesting respondents' uncertainty regarding the effectiveness and inclusiveness of these strategies. The study concludes that political parties in South Sudan operate as partially adaptive yet institutionally weak actors. While some parties continue to maintain loyalty to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) due to its historical role in the liberation struggle, the majority recognizes that entrenched political dominance constrains democratic processes, political inclusiveness, and equitable development. Addressing these institutional and political gaps would enable political parties in South Sudan to move beyond adaptive survival strategies and become credible instruments for democratic consolidation, peacebuilding, and inclusive governance.

Keywords: political dominance, political parties, adoptive strategies.

Introduction

Political dominance is a common feature of many post-conflict societies, where one political party exercises significant influence over state institutions, political processes, and access to public resources. While dominant-party systems may contribute to political stability in the immediate aftermath of conflict, they often constrain political competition, weaken democratic institutions, and limit the participation of opposition parties. In response to such conditions, political parties frequently develop adaptive strategies to sustain their relevance, mobilize support, and influence governance despite operating within an uneven political environment.

In post-conflict South Sudan, the political landscape has largely been shaped by the dominance of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), whose historical role in the liberation struggle has enabled it to maintain substantial political influence. This dominance has created significant challenges for opposition parties, including limited political space, restricted access to state resources, weak institutional capacity, and unequal opportunities to compete in democratic processes. Consequently, political parties have adopted various adaptive strategies, such as forming political alliances, engaging in dialogue and negotiations, strengthening grassroots mobilization, advocating for institutional reforms, and participating in peacebuilding initiatives to remain politically relevant.

Understanding these adaptive strategies is essential for assessing the resilience of political parties and their contribution to democratic consolidation in South Sudan. Examining how political parties respond to political dominance provides valuable insights into the opportunities and constraints affecting multiparty democracy, inclusive governance, and sustainable peace in the country's post-conflict transition.

General Objective

Assess and understanding adoptive strategies essential for political parties and contribution to democratic consolidation in South Sudan

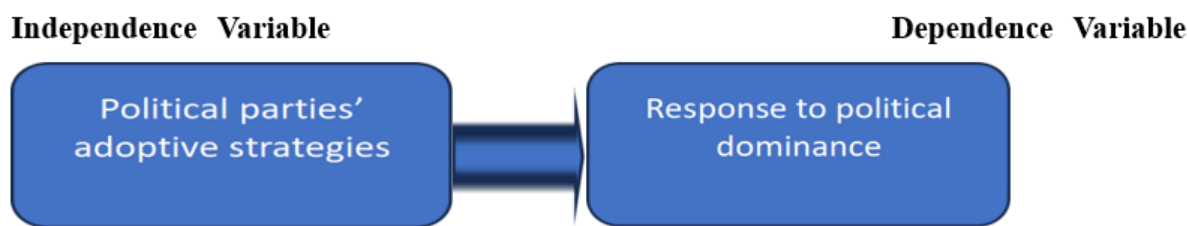
Specific Objective

Examining how political parties respond to political dominance provides valuable insights into the opportunities and constraints affecting multiparty democracy, in the post-conflict transition of South Sudan.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between the two main variables of the study. Independent Variable: Political parties' adoptive strategies and Dependent Variable: Response to political dominance. The framework suggests that political parties' adoptive strategies influence how parties respond to political dominance in the study context. Strengthened adaptive strategies are expected to improve political responsiveness, competitiveness, and engagement in dominant political environments.

Fig.1. Conceptual framework



Source: Researchers data (2026)

Theoretical perspectives

The study is anchored on the elite bridging theory, developed by Hauge and Ellingsen (2012), which builds on classical elite theory in political science. Elite theory, initially advanced by scholars such as Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, emphasizes that political power is concentrated in the hands of a small minority that dominates decision-making processes in society. Harold D. Lasswell further contributed to elite theory in his work of *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (1936), where he identified elites as a small group that controls most societal resources such as income, security, and prestige, while most of the population has limited access to these resources. Alongside Abraham Kaplan, Lasswell reinforced the idea that society is structured between the ruling elite and the mass population. Robert Dahl (1956) later expanded the debate by questioning elite dominance in democratic systems, arguing that political power is distributed through competing groups rather than a single ruling class. Similarly, Schumpeter (1942) emphasized that democracy is fundamentally a competitive struggle for leadership, where elites play a central role in governing decisions. In this study, the elite bridging theory explains how political parties operate within elite-dominated political systems, particularly how they adopt strategies to navigate political dominance and maintain relevance in competitive or constrained political environments such as South Sudan.

Literature Review

Political parties' participation and adopted framework

Political parties are central to democratic governance as instruments of representation, policy articulation, and political competition. Their effectiveness depends largely on their ability to engage citizens, especially at the grassroots level, where political legitimacy is formed and sustained. Grassroots participation enables parties to understand public needs, mobilize support, and strengthen democratic legitimacy. Without such engagement, parties risk detachment from society and weakened credibility (Randall & Svasand, 2002). Institutional frameworks determine how parties operate and interact with citizens. Randall and Svasand (2002) identify four key dimensions of party institutionalization: regular inter-party competition, strong societal roots, electoral legitimacy, and solid organizational structures. These dimensions ensure predictability and stability in party systems. However, Mainwaring and Scully (1995) note, measuring legitimacy and cohesion, remains context-dependent and difficult to quantify.

Additionally, scholars expand this framework. Morlino (1998) emphasizes electoral stability and political class continuity, while Bielasiak (2001) focuses on electoral democracy, contestation, and representation. Kreuzer and Pettai (2003) highlight the interaction between party organizations and voter behavior. Meleshevich (2007) stresses external autonomy and internal stability, while Lindberg (2007) links

institutionalization to system stabilization. Grassroots participation is particularly important in multiparty systems, where competition encourages responsiveness and inclusivity. It promotes political socialization, civic engagement, and accountability. In post-conflict states such as South Sudan, however, dominant-party systems restrict participation, limiting opposition mobilization and weakening pluralism (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022; Johnson, 2016).

Effective participation frameworks include organizational structure, resource mobilization, policy orientation, societal embeddedness, and electoral engagement (Randall & Svasand, 2002; Seawright, 2012). Emerging democracies often struggle with weak institutions and limited civic engagement. In South Sudan, insecurity and regulatory constraints further weaken party–citizen linkages. Comparative evidence shows that well-institutionalized parties are more stable and legitimate (Randall & Svasand, 2002; Seawright, 2012). Strengthening participation frameworks is therefore essential for democratic consolidation. There are 39 registered political parties in South Sudan at the time of writing this article. The dominance of these parties is SPLM under the chairmanship of Salva Kiir Mayardit who double up as the President of Republic of South Sudan.

Political parties' engagements and independent groups

Political engagement with citizens and independent groups is a core function of democratic parties. It strengthens accountability, transparency, and political inclusion. In post-conflict states like South Sudan, engagement is essential for reconciliation and state-building (Randall & Svasand, 2002; Seawright, 2012). The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 provided a foundation for political participation in South Sudan. It aimed to promote peace and democratic governance through structured political competition (Plaut & Akol, 2012). However, implementation challenges have constrained this vision. The Political Parties Act of 2007 introduced regulatory requirements that made party formation difficult, including high membership thresholds across states (Plaut & Akol, 2012). These restrictions limit grassroots participation and reinforce dominant-party politics, particularly the SPLM's dominance (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2005; Van de Walle, 2006). The 2012 amendments further centralized political control, raising concerns about political repression and reduced civic space. Security provisions allowing arbitrary arrests have continued to weakened trust in political institutions and discouraged opposition engagement (Plaut & Akol, 2012).

Multiparty systems rely on competition and coalition-building to ensure inclusion (Karvonen & Anckar, n.d.). However, in South Sudan, political engagement remains constrained by legal, security, and structural barriers. This limits the ability of parties to represent diverse interests and reduces accountability (Johnson, 2016). Comparative African experiences show that

stronger party–citizen engagement improves governance. Ghana and Kenya demonstrate how multiparty systems can enhance accountability through grassroots participation, while restrictive systems such as Uganda show weaker engagement and political apathy (Lindberg, 2007; Seawright, 2012). Religious institutions and civil society play important mediating roles in political engagement. In South Sudan, churches often provide platforms for dialogue and civic education, particularly in rural areas (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022). Strengthening inclusive engagement frameworks is therefore essential for democratic consolidation.

The external and internal influences of political Parties

Political parties are shaped by both internal and external influences. Internal factors include leadership structure, organizational capacity, and internal cohesion. External influences include civil society, media, religious institutions, and international actors (Randall & Svasand, 2002; Seawright, 2012). In South Sudan, civil war and political instability significantly weakened civil society organizations. Reduced funding and restrictive laws such as the National Security Act, 2024 limited their ability to support democratic participation (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2025). Some civil society groups became politicized, reducing their neutrality and effectiveness (Johnson, 2025).

External actors such as NGOs and international organizations also withdrew or reduced operations, weakening accountability mechanisms in South Sudan. This further constrained political party development and citizens engagement. Internally, weak party structures and factionalism undermine democratic functioning. Many South Sudanese parties are extensions of armed movements with centralized leadership and limited internal democracy (Randall & Svasand, 2002). This reduces accountability and citizens representation. Religious institutions, particularly churches, remain influential external actors. They provide civic education, conflict mediation, and moral oversight of political actors. During conflicts, churches have played key roles in advocating peace and social cohesion (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022; Johnson, 2016). Comparative evidence shows that countries with strong civil society and media oversight, such as Ghana, have stronger democratic outcomes than those with restricted civic space (Seawright, 2012; Lindberg, 2007). Effective democracy therefore depends on the interaction between internal party strength and external accountability structures.

Media, political rallies and political networking

Media, political rallies, and networking are essential tools for political communication and mobilization. Historically, media has played a key role in shaping political participation. During the 1828 U.S. presidential elections, newspapers and public campaigns significantly influenced voter behavior and party support (Flanagan, 2021). Media remains critical in modern democracies for shaping public opinion and enabling political discourse. In emerging democracies, it provides a platform for political education and competition.

Political rallies are also important for direct engagement between parties and citizens. They allow parties to communicate policies, mobilize supporters, and assess public sentiment. In contexts with limited media access, rallies have become the primary channel of political communication (Karvonen & Anckar, n.d.; Seawright, 2012). In South Sudan rallies remain

vital due to limited media penetration, especially in rural areas. They also promote social cohesion and political awareness (Johnson, 2025). Political networking involves coalition-building among parties and engagement with civil society, religious institutions, and other stakeholders.

In multiparty systems, coalition-building is essential for governance (Flanagan, 2021). Networks help parties negotiate alliances, share resources, and strengthen political influence. Countries like Germany and the Netherlands demonstrate how coalition systems encourage moderation and policy-focused governance. In contrast, two-party systems such as the United States often produce polarization (Drutman, 2020). African democracies such as Ghana and South Africa show that strong media systems, rallies, and networks enhance participation and accountability (Seawright, 2012; Lindberg, 2007). However, South Sudan faces challenges such as insecurity, weak institutions, and limited media freedom. Strengthening media freedom, protecting political rallies, and institutionalizing networking structures are essential for democratic consolidation in South Sudan.

Methodology

Research design and data collection methods

The study employed a mixed-methods approach using focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and a survey as primary tools for data collection. These methods were selected to ensure triangulation of data and to enhance the validity and reliability of findings related to the research objective. Focus group discussions were used to capture collective views and shared experiences among political party members. Key informant interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth insights from political party leaders and experts, while the survey method provided quantitative data to support broader generalization of findings.

Target Population of the Study

The study targeted the population of 240,070 to get various respondents on political parties' adoptive strategies in response to political dominance in South Sudan.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size for the study was determined using the Yamane (1967) formula, which is widely used in social science research due to its simplicity and effectiveness in estimating appropriate sample sizes for large populations.

The formula expresses as:

Where:

- n = Sample size
- N = Population size
- e = Level of precision (0.05 at 95% confidence level)

Applying the formula:

$$n = \frac{240,074}{1 + 240,074(0.0025)}$$
$$n = 384$$

Thus, the total sample size for the study was 384 respondents.

Sampling Techniques and Procedures

The study used purposive sampling techniques to select participants who had relevant knowledge and experience regarding political party operations and political dynamics in South Sudan.

Table 1: Categories for Purposive Sampling for Qualitative Data.

Data Collection Method	Categories	Target Locations	Sampling Techniques
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	2 FGDs of political party members per location (3 locations: Wau, Juba, Malakal) = 6 FGDs total × 12 participants = 72 respondents	Western Bahr el Ghazal (Wau), Central Equatoria (Juba), Upper Nile (Malakal)	Purposive sampling
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	Political party leaders and key stakeholders (total 28 KIIs)	Wau (9 KIIs), Juba (11 KIIs), Malakal (8 KIIs)	Purposive sampling

Source: Researchers data (2026)

Results and Discussions

The single study objective on political parties' adoptive strategies in response to political dominance presents the descriptive statistic on the political parties' adoptive strategies

in response to political dominance in post-conflict South Sudan. The scale 1-5 level strongly agree to strongly disagreed has been used to capture the opinion of the respondents.

Results

Table 2: Descriptive statistic on the political parties' adoptive strategies in response to political dominance South Sudan N=257.

In a scale of 1-5 tick the following statements appropriately;		1		2		3		4		5		Mean	Total
where 1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 Undecided, 4 = Disagree; And 5 = Strongly Disagree		SA		A		U		D		SD			
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
1	The Political parties encourage active citizen participation	71	28	56	21.8	33	12.8	49	19.1	48	18.7	2.79	257
2	The adopted frameworks for political processes are inclusive	44	17	50	19.5	34	13.2	69	26.8	60	23.3	3.20	257
3	Citizens are satisfied with the level of participation	40	16	40	15.6	29	11.3	73	28.4	75	29.2	3.49	257
4	Political parties actively seek feedback and input from citizens.	52	20	54	21.0	37	14.4	53	20.6	61	23.7	3.07	257
5	The engagement with independent groups by political parties	47	18	42	16.3	50	19.5	57	22.2	61	23.7	3.17	257
6	Political parties maintain internal autonomy in decision-making	53	21	54	21.0	55	21.4	48	18.7	47	18.3	2.93	257
7	External and internal influence affects political parties	72	28	61	23.7	38	14.8	43	16.7	43	16.7	2.70	257
8	Th political parties work actively to response	47	18	63	24.5	36	14.0	55	21.4	56	21.8	3.04	257
Total Overall Mean												3.04	

Source: Researchers field data (2026)

The table 2 above illustrates respondents' perceptions of how political parties in South Sudan adopt their strategies to respond to political dominance. Using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree).

Demographic of the Respondents

The demography shows the gender, age, education, occupation and political affiliation of the respondents as below:

Gender Distribution (N = 257)

Category	Frequency	Percent
1	1	10.00
2	1	10.00
3	1	10.00
4	1	10.00
5	1	10.00
6	1	10.00
7	1	10.00
8	1	10.00
9	1	10.00
10	1	10.00
11	1	10.00
12	1	10.00
13	1	10.00
14	1	10.00
15	1	10.00
16	1	10.00
17	1	10.00
18	1	10.00
19	1	10.00
20	1	10.00
21	1	10.00
22	1	10.00
23	1	10.00
24	1	10.00
25	1	10.00
26	1	10.00
27	1	10.00
28	1	10.00
29	1	10.00
30	1	10.00
31	1	10.00
32	1	10.00
33	1	10.00
34	1	10.00
35	1	10.00
36	1	10.00
37	1	10.00
38	1	10.00
39	1	10.00
40	1	10.00
41	1	10.00
42	1	10.00
43	1	10.00
44	1	10.00
45	1	10.00
46	1	10.00
47	1	10.00
48	1	10.00
49	1	10.00
50	1	10.00
51	1	10.00
52	1	10.00
53	1	10.00
54	1	10.00
55	1	10.00
56	1	10.00
57	1	10.00
58	1	10.00
59	1	10.00
60	1	10.00
61	1	10.00
62	1	10.00
63	1	10.00
64	1	10.00
65	1	10.00
66	1	10.00
67	1	10.00
68	1	10.00
69	1	10.00
70	1	10.00
71	1	10.00
72	1	10.00
73	1	10.00
74	1	10.00
75	1	10.00
76	1	10.00
77	1	10.00
78	1	10.00
79	1	10.00
80	1	10.00
81	1	10.00
82	1	10.00
83	1	10.00
84	1	10.00
85	1	10.00
86	1	10.00
87	1	10.00
88	1	10.00
89	1	10.00
90	1	10.00
91	1	10.00
92	1	10.00
93	1	10.00
94	1	10.00
95	1	10.00
96	1	10.00
97	1	10.00
98	1	10.00
99	1	10.00
100	1	10.00

Male	177	69%
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Female	80	31%
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The sample is male dominated, which may influence interpretation of political participation perspectives.

Age Distribution

Category	Frequency	Percent
1	1	10.00
2	1	10.00
3	1	10.00
4	1	10.00
5	1	10.00
6	1	10.00
7	1	10.00
8	1	10.00
9	1	10.00
10	1	10.00
11	1	10.00
12	1	10.00
13	1	10.00
14	1	10.00
15	1	10.00
16	1	10.00
17	1	10.00
18	1	10.00
19	1	10.00
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29	1	10.00
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31	1	10.00
32	1	10.00
33	1	10.00
34	1	10.00
35	1	10.00
36	1	10.00
37	1	10.00
38	1	10.00
39	1	10.00
40	1	10.00
41	1	10.00
42	1	10.00
43	1	10.00
44	1	10.00
45	1	10.00
46	1	10.00
47	1	10.00
48	1	10.00
49	1	10.00
50	1	10.00
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52	1	10.00
53	1	10.00
54	1	10.00
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61	1	10.00
62	1	10.00
63	1	10.00
64	1	10.00
65	1	10.00
66	1	10.00
67	1	10.00
68	1	10.00
69	1	10.00
70	1	10.00
71	1	10.00
72	1	10.00
73	1	10.00
74	1	10.00
75	1	10.00
76	1	10.00
77	1	10.00
78	1	10.00
79	1	10.00
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81	1	10.00
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86	1	10.00
87	1	10.00
88	1	10.00
89	1	10.00
90	1	10.00
91	1	10.00
92	1	10.00
93	1	10.00
94	1	10.00
95	1	10.00
96	1	10.00
97	1	10.00
98	1	10.00
99	1	10.00
100	1	10.00

25–35 99 39%

36–45	102	40%
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46+	56	21%
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The majority (79%) are economically and politically active age groups, while older citizens are underrepresented.

Education Level

Category	Frequency	Percent
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Primary	26	11%
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Secondary	55	21%
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Secondary	55	21%
College	60	23%

College	59	25%
University	116	45%

The sample is highly educated (68% college and university level), suggesting informed political perspectives.

Occupation Status

Category	Frequency	Percent
Employed	116	45%
Not Employed	141	55%

A slight majority are unemployed, which may influence perceptions of governance and political inclusion.

Political Affiliation

Category	Frequency	Percent
Yes	72	28%
No	185	72%

Most respondents are not politically affiliated, indicating largely neutral public perceptions of political parties.

Political Parties and Citizen Participation

Respondents show mixed perceptions regarding citizen participation: Strongly Agree (27.6%), Agree (21.8%), Disagree (19.1%), Strongly Disagree (18.7%). The meaning (2.79) suggests moderate agreement, but qualitative findings reveal that participation is largely symbolic and elite driven. Key Informant and FGD evidence

Political parties adopt different survival strategies

PPC (2026): “merging of political parties” “coalition-building before elections” “Strategic alliances”

SPLM (2026): “Building public trust” “Updating party manifesto”

“Voter mobilization”

Inclusiveness and Fairness of Political Frameworks

Responses indicate skepticism: Strongly Agree (17.1%), Agree (19.5%), Disagree (26.8%) , Strongly Disagree (23.3%). Mean = 3.20, showing perceptions of non-inclusive and elite-centered frameworks

FGDs “I am not sure if parties participate in high-level dialogue with dominant powers.” (FGD|19|01|2026, Wau) “Political parties should promote civic education and constitutional awareness.” (KII|08|09|2025, Juba)

Citizen Satisfaction with Political Participation

The respondents Strongly Agree (15.6%), Agree (15.6%), Disagree (28.4%), Strongly Disagree (29.2%) and with Mean = 3.49 (highest dissatisfaction level)

This shows widespread citizen dissatisfaction and political exclusion, where participation is limited to voting and rallies rather than governance.

FGDs/KIIs

“Political parties should engage communities in decision-making processes.” (FGD|19|01|2026)

“Citizens should be encouraged to participate fairly.” (KII|08|09|2026)

Feedback Mechanisms

The feedback indicated that Strongly Agree (20.2%), Agree (21.0%)

Disagree (20.6%), Strongly Disagree (23.7%) and Mean = 3.07. Findings show weak feedback systems and lack of structured consultation. Evidence

“There is no feedback from citizens.” (FGD|28|10|2025, Malakal)

“Political parties should seek feedback and adopt strategies accordingly.” (KII, Juba)

Engagement with Independent Groups

Response indicated that strongly Agree (18.3%), Agree (16.3%) Disagree (22.2%), Strongly Disagree (23.7%) and Mean = 3.17. Findings indicate limited transparency and selective engagement with civil society and media.

“Political parties are not allowed to engage citizens freely.” (FGD)

“External influences must be avoided.” (KII|14|01|2026, Wau)

Internal Autonomy and External Influence

The Internal Autonomy show a Mean = 2.93

Shows moderate autonomy, but decision-making remains elite-centered.

“Some parties lack implementation due to limited political space.” (FGD|12|09|2025)

External/Internal Influence

External influence Mean = 2.70

Indicates strong influence of: International actors, Donors, Elite networks and Peace agreements

“Transparency and democracy should be promoted for fair elections.” (FGD|22|09|2025)

Response to Political Dominance

The responses indicated the Strongly Agree (18.3%), Agree (24.5%), Disagree (21.4%) and Strongly Disagree (21.8%). The Mean = 3.04 show Findings show neutrality and weak adaptive capacity among political parties.

Party strategies during key informant show

Opposition parties: Coalition building, advocacy for reforms and strategic alliances

SPLM: Public trust building, Manifesto revision and Voter mobilization

“Political parties should continuously work to resolve political dominance.” (KII|15|01|2026, Wau)

Overall Interpretation

The overall findings (Mean = 3.04) indicate that: Political parties operate in a moderately uncertain and constrained environment, Participation is limited and elite-driven, Citizen satisfaction is very low, Feedback mechanisms are weak, and Party strategies are reactive rather than transformative

Discussions

This section discusses findings on political parties’ adoptive strategies in response to political dominance in South Sudan. The analysis is based on Table 2, using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree), supported by Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The discussion addresses Objective Three of the study, focusing on how political parties adapt within the context of dominant-party politics, fragile institutions, and post-conflict governance dynamics. Understanding political party behavior in South Sudan requires situating it within a broader structural context characterized by civil conflict, elite bargaining, and externally mediated peace processes. In such environments, political parties often function less as fully institutionalized democratic actors and more as adaptive survival-oriented entities. Theoretical insights from Elite Theory provide a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. Elite Theory explains concentration of power among a small ruling group (Pareto; Mosca),

Encouraging Citizen Participation in Political Processes

The study found that respondents moderately agreed that political parties encourage citizen participation (Mean = 2.79). Specifically, 27.6% strongly agreed and 21.8% agreed, while

37.8% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. FGDs confirmed that participation exists mainly during elections and political mobilization: "Political parties encouraged to actively involve citizens in political processes." FGD | 14 | 01 | 2026, Wau However, participation is largely symbolic rather than substantive. Political parties mobilize citizens primarily for legitimacy rather than inclusion in decision-making. From an Elite Theory perspective, this reflects elite dominance where participation is controlled and instrumentalized rather than empowering.

A key informant noted:

"Political parties should adopt inclusive governance and focus on citizen needs."

KII | 12 | 09 | 2025, Juba

This aligns with literature by Johnson (2016) and de Waal, who argue that political participation in South Sudan is often structured around elite bargaining rather than citizen empowerment. Within the framework, participation becomes transactional, where citizens engage for access to resources rather than policy influence.

Inclusiveness and Fairness of Political Frameworks

Findings show skepticism regarding inclusiveness of political frameworks (Mean = 3.20). A combined 50% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that frameworks are fair and inclusive. FGD participants expressed uncertainty about elite-level negotiations: "I am not sure if parties participate in high-level dialogue with dominant powers..." FGD | 20 | 01 | 2026, Wau This reflects perceptions that political structures prioritize elite power-sharing over citizen inclusion. This is consistent with Nouwen and Leonardi, who argue that South Sudan's post-conflict arrangements are elite-centered. Using elite theory, political elites operate between domestic pressures and international expectations. Consequently, political frameworks are often shaped to satisfy donors and mediators rather than citizens, resulting in elite accommodation rather than democratic inclusion.

Another participant emphasized: "If frameworks exist, they should be disseminated to citizens." FGD | 22 | 01 | 2026, Wau This highlights weak civic awareness and limited transparency in political processes.

Citizen Satisfaction with Political Participation

Citizen satisfaction recorded the highest dissatisfaction level (Mean = 3.49), with 57.6% of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that citizens are satisfied with participation levels. FGDs confirmed widespread exclusion: "Political parties should engage communities in decision-making processes." This indicates a strong demand for deeper participation beyond electoral cycles. From an Elite Theory perspective, dissatisfaction arises because elites dominate decision-making while citizens remain marginal actors. According to Boswell and Deng, political processes in South Sudan remain disconnected from grassroots realities, reinforcing institutional distrust. Within an Elite theory system, political inclusion depends on patronage networks, meaning citizens without elite connections remain excluded from benefits and influence.

Political Parties' Feedback Mechanisms

The study found uncertainty regarding feedback mechanisms (Mean = 3.07). Nearly equal proportions agreed and disagreed that parties seek citizen input. A key informant stated:

"Political parties need to seek feedback from citizens and adopt strategies accordingly." However, evidence suggests weak

institutionalized consultation mechanisms such as policy forums or constituency engagement platforms (Rolandsen). This supports Elite theory, where political communication is informal and personalized rather than institutionalized. Feedback is often selective and dependent on political convenience rather than structured systems.

Internal Autonomy in Decision-Making

Findings indicate moderate internal autonomy (Mean = 2.93), though qualitative data suggests constrained decision-making. FGDs revealed: "Some political parties have good strategies but lack implementation due to limited political space in South Sudan." Political parties are often hierarchical, with decisions concentrated among elites. This reflects Elite Theory, where leadership groups dominate organizational decision-making. Additionally, Two-Level Game Theory explains how internal autonomy is constrained by external negotiations, including peace agreements and international expectations. Parties adjust internal decisions to maintain political relevance.

External and Internal Influences on Party Strategies

The study found strong agreement that party strategies are influenced by external and internal forces (Mean = 2.70). These include international donors, Peace agreements, regional organizations and Political elites and patronage networks. FGDs confirmed donor and institutional influence over party behavior. This aligns with Two-Level Game Theory, where domestic actors must adapt to international pressures. It also reflects Keen's analysis of post-conflict political economies, where governance is shaped by hybrid formal-informal systems.

Active Response to Political Dominance

The study found neutrality regarding whether parties actively respond to dominance (Mean = 3.04). Responses indicate limited and inconsistent strategies. Key informants noted:

"Opposition parties rely on coalition-building, party mergers, and advocacy for reforms."

However, these strategies are largely reactive rather than transformative. This aligns with Levitsky and Way (2010), who argue that opposition parties in competitive authoritarian systems operate under structural constraints that limit effective challenge to incumbent. FGDs also highlighted issues of weak capacity and fragmented opposition. From de Waal's political marketplace theory, political competition in South Sudan is based on bargaining and alliance formation rather than institutionalized contestation. As a result, parties prioritize survival strategies such as coalition-building and alignment with stronger actors.

Conclusion

The study concludes that while political parties in South Sudan have adaptive strategies, these strategies are largely constrained by SPLM political dominance. While parties engage in coalition-building, citizen mobilization, and advocacy, these strategies remain reactive, fragmented, and elite-driven rather than transformative. The findings demonstrate that: citizen participation is largely symbolic, with limited influence on decision-making, political frameworks are perceived as elite-centered, limiting inclusivity and transparency, citizen satisfaction is very low, reflecting political marginalization, feedback mechanisms are weak and informal, reducing accountability, internal party autonomy exists but is constrained by elite control and external pressures, party strategies are heavily influenced by external actors and patronage systems,

reinforcing dependency and responses to political dominance are inconsistent and survival-oriented, not reform-driven.

Theoretically, these findings confirm the relevance of elite theory in explaining political party behavior in post-conflict South Sudan. Empirically, they show that political parties operate within a hybrid political system characterized by elite bargaining, external dependency, and limited institutionalization. Overall, the study concludes that meaningful democratic consolidation in South Sudan requires structural reforms that strengthen internal party democracy, institutionalize citizen participation, enhance transparency, and reduce elite monopolization of political processes.

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