



## Leadership, legitimacy and service delivery in South Sudan's fragile state context

Karima Ahmadi

Department of School Business and Management, Texila American University, Guyana

### Abstract

**Background:** South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, has been trapped in a cycle of conflict, political instability, and institutional decay since independence in 2011. Despite substantial oil wealth, the country ranks at the bottom of global development indices, reflecting systemic governance failure.

**Objective:** This study examined the relationship between leadership, legitimacy, and service delivery in South Sudan's fragile state context. It explored how leadership practices shape institutional legitimacy and public trust, and identified mechanisms through which leadership deficits undermine service delivery.

**Methods:** Drawing on neo-patrimonialism, state-in-society theory, and fragile state theory, the study employed a qualitative case study design with 25 participants comprising policymakers, civil society leaders, service delivery practitioners, and local administrators. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, and analysed using thematic analysis.

**Findings:** Leadership practices shape institutional legitimacy through personalized authority, ethnic patronage, and weak institutional culture, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of delegitimization. Leadership deficits undermine service delivery through resource diversion, political interference, fragmented service delivery, and erosion of public trust. Participants proposed institutional reforms including strengthening oversight institutions, decentralization, professionalising the civil service, and integrating traditional governance structures.

**Conclusion:** South Sudan's governance crisis is produced and sustained by leadership practices that prioritize elite accumulation over public welfare. Breaking the destructive cycle requires comprehensive reforms addressing neo-patrimonial practices, rebuilding institutional legitimacy, and restoring state capacity to deliver services.

**Keywords:** Leadership, legitimacy, service delivery, fragile state, South Sudan, Neo-patrimonialism, governance, institutional reform

### Introduction

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, exemplifies the profound challenges of governance in a fragile state context. Emerging from one of Africa's longest civil wars, the country gained independence in July 2011<sup>[24]</sup> following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 (Mamdani, 2020; Deng, 2018)<sup>[12, 16, 36]</sup>. The euphoria of statehood was short lived, however, as the nation descended into civil war in December 2013, triggered by political infighting within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement that rapidly escalated along ethnic lines (LeRiche & Arnold, 2013)<sup>[33]</sup>. The conflict claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced over four million people, representing Africa's largest refugee crisis since the Rwandan genocide (UNHCR, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2022). The 2018<sup>[17, 52, 54]</sup> Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan established a transitional government of national unity in February 2020<sup>[36]</sup>, yet implementation remains slow, and the country continues to face persistent threats of renewed violence, resource mismanagement, and institutional collapse (Ceasay & Asmorawati, 2025; Yoh & Ngwenya, 2025)<sup>[10]</sup>. This paradox is stark given South Sudan's substantial oil wealth, over \$25 billion in revenues since independence, which has been largely captured by a narrow political military elite rather than invested in public goods and infrastructure (De Waal, 2020; Patey, 2014)<sup>[36, 46]</sup>. Consequently, South Sudan ranks at the bottom of both the United Nations Human Development Index and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, reflecting a systemic governance failure with devastating

human consequences (UNDP, 2024; Transparency International, 2024)<sup>[54]</sup>.

At the heart of this crisis lies a tripartite governance dilemma: the nature of leadership, the basis of political legitimacy, and the capacity for service delivery. Leadership in South Sudan is shaped by what scholars term a "pre-national mindset," a cognitive and political orientation forged through decades of liberation struggle, wherein authority is exercised as militarized command rather than institutional negotiation, and political offices are treated as personal property rather than public trusts (Oyay, 2025; Theron, 2022)<sup>[20, 52]</sup>. This militarized political culture has produced a predatory elite consensus, where power is maintained through coercion, patronage, and ethnic mobilization rather than popular consent or institutional performance (Theron, 2022; Eaton, 2018)<sup>[17, 52]</sup>. In the absence of strong institutions, ethnic affiliation and personal loyalty have become the primary sources of political authority, with the state perceived by citizens less as a provider of services than as an extractive enterprise to be resisted or avoided (Babyesiza, 2015; Migdal, 2001)<sup>[18, 41]</sup>. The service delivery crisis is starkly evident across all sectors: health receives less than two percent of the national budget, maternal mortality stands at 789 deaths per 100,000 live births, and millions remain dependent on humanitarian assistance (UNDP, 2024; Save the Children, 2023)<sup>[54, 55]</sup>. This study examines the interconnected relationships between leadership practices, institutional legitimacy, and service delivery outcomes in South Sudan's fragile state context, and identifies pathways for breaking the destructive cycle of predation, mistrust, and service failure.

## Problem Statement

The interplay between leadership, legitimacy, and service delivery in South Sudan represents a critical governance crisis with devastating human consequences. The problem is fundamentally structural: leadership in South Sudan operates through what scholars describe as a "pre-national mindset," a cognitive and political orientation shaped by decades of liberation war, wherein authority is exercised as militarized command rather than institutional negotiation, and loyalty to the "big man" supersedes adherence to rules (Oyay, 2025; Theron, 2022) <sup>[44, 52]</sup>. This neo-patrimonial system has systematically undermined the state's capacity to deliver basic services. De Waal (2014) <sup>[15]</sup> characterizes the ruling elite's behavior as kleptocratic, noting that national leaders use every opportunity to embezzle public funds, while oil revenue is consumed by the military political patronage system, leaving almost nothing for public services, development, and institution building. The legitimacy deficit compounds this crisis. In the absence of strong institutions, ethnic affiliation has become the primary source of political legitimacy, with elites mobilizing constituencies as kin based collectives competing over state rents rather than as national citizens (Eaton, 2018; Roach, 2023) <sup>[17, 48]</sup>. The result is a reinforcing cycle: weak leadership erodes institutional legitimacy, diminished legitimacy undermines service delivery, and poor service delivery further delegitimizes the state in the eyes of citizens. This study examines how leadership practices shape institutional legitimacy and service delivery outcomes in South Sudan's fragile state context, and identifies pathways for breaking this destructive cycle through institutional reform and accountable governance.

## Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do prevailing leadership practices in South Sudan shape institutional legitimacy and public trust in the state?
2. What are the mechanisms through which leadership deficits undermine service delivery outcomes, and what institutional reforms could break the destructive cycle of predation, mistrust, and service failure in South Sudan's fragile state context?

## Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the literature on state fragility by examining the interconnections between leadership, legitimacy, and service delivery, rather than treating these as discrete governance problems (Migdal, 2001; Ceesay & Asmorawati, 2025) <sup>[10, 41]</sup>. Understanding these relationships is essential for designing effective interventions in fragile states, where conventional approaches to institutional reform have largely failed (De Waal, 2014; Theron, 2022) <sup>[15, 52]</sup>. Second, the findings will inform policymakers, development partners, and civil society organizations working in South Sudan about the structural barriers to effective service delivery, particularly the ways in which patrimonial leadership practices undermine institutional legitimacy and public trust (Yoh & Ngwenya, 2025<sup>[20]</sup>; Babyesiza, 2015). Third, the study contributes to broader theoretical debates on state building and governance in post conflict contexts, offering empirical insights that may be relevant to other fragile states in the Horn of Africa and

beyond (Mamdani, 2020; Eaton, 2018) <sup>[17, 36]</sup>. Finally, by identifying pathways for breaking the destructive cycle of predation and mistrust, this research has practical implications for improving the lives of millions of South Sudanese citizens who continue to bear the burden of state failure (UNDP, 2024; Save the Children, 2023) <sup>[48, 54]</sup>.

## Literature Review

### Leadership

Leadership in fragile states operates through patrimonial logics where authority is personalized and public office is treated as private property (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Clapham, 1996). In South Sudan, Theron (2022) and Oyay (2025) <sup>[13, 44, 52]</sup> describe a militarized political culture shaped by the liberation struggle, wherein leaders view the state as an extension of personal authority rather than a public trust. This patrimonial style prioritizes regime survival and patronage networks over institutional development and public welfare (De Waal, 2014; Erdmann & Engel, 2007) <sup>[15, 21]</sup>.

### Legitimacy

Political legitimacy, or public acceptance of authority as rightful, is foundational to governance (Weber, 1978) <sup>[57]</sup>. In fragile states, legitimacy is often fragmented and contested (Boege et al., 2008). Migdal's (2001) <sup>[40, 41]</sup> framework shows how weak states coexist with societal actors that command greater legitimacy. In South Sudan, ethnic affiliation and personal loyalty have become primary sources of political authority, eroding public trust in state institutions (Eaton, 2018; Roach, 2023) <sup>[48]</sup>.

### Service Delivery

Service delivery in fragile states faces weak capacity, inadequate financing, and political interference (Brinkerhoff et al., 2012; World Bank, 2011) <sup>[8, 58]</sup>. South Sudan allocates less than two percent of its budget to health, producing some of the worst health indicators globally (UNDP, 2024; Save the Children, 2023). This crisis is perpetuated by institutional weakness and a disconnect between formal commitments and implementation, creating a "parallel state" where international actors provide services while the formal state remains absent (Ceesay & Asmorawati, 2025; Babyesiza, 2015) <sup>[3, 10]</sup>.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interconnected theoretical perspectives that collectively explain the relationship between leadership, legitimacy, and service delivery in South Sudan's fragile state context.

### Neo-Patrimonialism

Neo-patrimonialism provides the primary lens for understanding leadership behavior. This theory posits that formal institutional rules are often subordinated to personalized relationships of patronage, where public office holders treat state resources as personal property (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Erdmann & Engel, 2007) <sup>[21]</sup>. This explains why South Sudanese leaders prioritize regime survival over public welfare, diverting state revenues to patronage networks rather than investing in services (De Waal, 2014; Theron, 2022) <sup>[15, 52]</sup>.

### State-in-Society Theory

Migdal's (2001) <sup>[41]</sup> state-in-society theory explains legitimacy deficits by emphasizing how societal actors shape state authority. In weak states, ethnic groups and traditional authorities often command greater legitimacy than the formal state (Boege et al., 2008) <sup>[40]</sup>. This framework illuminates why ethnic affiliation has become the primary source of political authority in South Sudan, eroding public trust in state institutions (Eaton, 2018; Roach, 2023) <sup>[48]</sup>.

### Fragile State Theory

Fragile state theory explains service delivery challenges, identifying such states as lacking capacity to provide basic services (World Bank, 2011; DFID, 2015) <sup>[18, 58]</sup>. Characterized by weak capacity and political interference, service delivery becomes fragmented and dependent on humanitarian actors (Brinkerhoff et al., 2012) <sup>[8]</sup>. South Sudan exemplifies this, with minimal budget allocation to health leaving millions reliant on aid (UNDP, 2024).

### Leadership and Institutional Legitimacy

Research reveals that prevailing leadership practices in South Sudan fundamentally shape institutional legitimacy through what scholars describe as a "pre-national mindset", a political orientation forged through decades of liberation war, where authority is exercised as command rather than negotiation, and political offices become extensions of personal power rather than institutional nodes (Oyay, 2025; Theron, 2022) <sup>[44, 52]</sup>. This aligns with neo-patrimonialism, which explains how formal institutional rules are subordinated to personalized relationships of patronage, where public office holders treat state resources as personal property (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Erdmann & Engel, 2007) <sup>[21]</sup>. In the absence of strong institutions, ethnic affiliation becomes the primary source of political legitimacy, with elites mobilizing constituencies as kin-based collectives competing over state rents rather than national citizens (Eaton, 2018; Roach, 2023) <sup>[17, 48]</sup>. This reinforces a zero-sum logic where state capture by one group is perceived as exclusion by others. State-in-society theory illuminates why societal actors ethnic groups and traditional authorities often command greater legitimacy than the formal state, with the state perceived "less as a provider of services than as a predator to be resisted or avoided" (Migdal, 2001<sup>[41]</sup>, p. 268). Research on law enforcement reveals that "absence of strategic leadership has led to fragmented operations, weak community engagement, and limited internal accountability," directly undermining public trust (Ekal et al., 2025<sup>[20]</sup>, p. 49). Judicial analysis shows public trust deficit constitutes a core challenge, with the judiciary "under siege from both internal and external forces since independence" (Gum, 2025<sup>[26]</sup>, p. 2). The constitutional framework concentrates power in the presidency, fueling winner-takes-all politics and leaving opposition groups with little confidence in electoral processes (Abebe, 2026) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### Leadership Deficits and Service Delivery

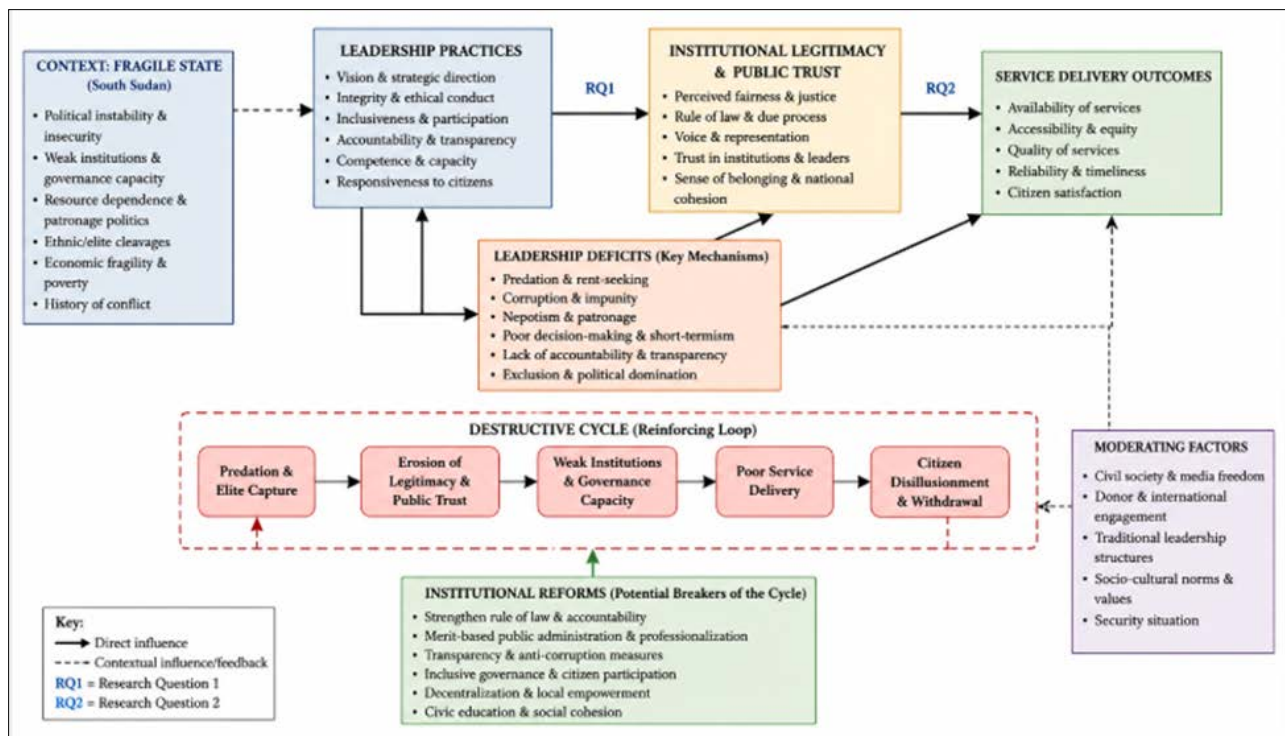
The mechanisms through which leadership deficits undermine service delivery are explained by fragile state

theory, which identifies fragile states as lacking capacity to perform core functions including service provision (World Bank, 2011; DFID, 2015) <sup>[18, 58]</sup>. South Sudan's oil wealth is managed through extractive institutions designed to concentrate power in elite hands while undermining accountability, consistent with neo-patrimonialism emphasis on resource diversion to patronage networks (Chipanda, 2026; De Waal, 2014) <sup>[11, 15]</sup>. Oil revenues are privatized into patronage networks, financing a political marketplace where loyalty is purchased through cash and positions while state revenues are diverted from public goods (De Waal, 2014) <sup>[15]</sup>. The UN Commission has documented that "the vast theft of national revenue and its criminal diversion continues," with \$1.7 billion in government payments going to companies linked to elites and \$2.2 billion disappearing into the "Oil for Roads" program (UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, 2024). In the 2023-2024<sup>[48, 54]</sup> budget, the Ministry of Health received just 19 percent of its allocation while the Ministry of Presidential Affairs overspent by 584 percent. In the health sector, "limited government investment has perpetuated reliance on international assistance, and barriers to engagement with government counterparts have restricted coordination" (Qaddour et al., 2025<sup>[47]</sup>, p. 4). This creates what fragile state theory describes as fragmented, inequitable service delivery dependent on international humanitarian actors (Mac Ginty, 2011; Babyesiza, 2015) <sup>[18, 35]</sup>. Political interference and mismanagement have hindered service delivery across parastatals, with leaders becoming "victims of political alignment or internal power blocs" (Akec, 2025) <sup>[2]</sup>. Institutional reforms that could break the destructive cycle include strengthening state autonomy, guaranteeing broad political representation, introducing presidential term limits, professionalizing public institutions, and building systems with written mandates, transparent performance reviews, and independent oversight reforms that address all three theoretical dimensions (Abebe, 2026; Auling, 2025; Akec, 2025) <sup>[1, 2, 4]</sup>.

### Conceptual Framework

Integrating these perspectives, leadership is conceptualized as the independent variable shaping both legitimacy and service delivery. Neo-patrimonial leadership undermines institutional capacity and diverts resources, while eroding legitimacy through ethnic patronage. This creates a reinforcing cycle: weak leadership erodes legitimacy, diminished legitimacy undermines service delivery and poor service delivery further delegitimizes the state. The framework further demonstrates that legitimacy and public trust shape service delivery outcomes, while leadership deficits such as corruption, weak accountability, patronage, and poor decision-making undermine both institutional legitimacy and effective service delivery. It also depicts the reinforcing cycle through which weak governance, declining public trust, and poor service provision sustain state fragility. Finally, the framework highlights institutional reforms as potential mechanisms for breaking this cycle and strengthening governance, legitimacy, and public service delivery. The framework serves as a guide for exploring participants' experiences and perceptions in relation to the study's research questions. Figure 1 presents the construct





Source: Author's Construct, 2026 <sup>[1]</sup>

**Fig 1:** Conceptual Framework Illustrating the Relationships among Leadership Practices, Institutional Legitimacy, Public Trust, and Service Delivery in South Sudan's Fragile State Context.

## Methodology

### Philosophical Underpinning

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, holding that social reality is constructed through subjective experience (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) <sup>[14, 17]</sup>. Interpretivism recognises that governance in fragile states is shaped by context and perceptions, making it suitable for exploring subjective concepts like legitimacy and trust through lived experiences of those navigating South Sudan's governance landscape (Bryman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2014; Stake, 2006) <sup>[51, 59]</sup>. The case study design enables in-depth, contextualised exploration of the complex interplay between leadership, legitimacy, and service delivery in South Sudan as a single bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018) <sup>[16]</sup>. This design is suited to answering "how" and "what" questions, allowing rich, detailed accounts of governance processes and participant perspectives (Merriam, 2009). The case study approach aligns with interpretivism by emphasising contextual understanding over generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2011) <sup>[24]</sup>.

### Study Area and Population

The study is conducted in South Sudan, targeting Juba and selected state capitals where governance institutions are most accessible (Ceesay & Asmorawati, 2025) <sup>[10]</sup>. The target population comprises policymakers, civil society representatives, service delivery practitioners, and local administrators who possess knowledge of governance, leadership, and service delivery (Yoh & Ngwenya, 2025) <sup>[60]</sup>.

### Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling selects 25 participants with in-depth knowledge of governance and service delivery (Patton, 2015) <sup>[18]</sup>. The sample includes policymakers and senior government officials (n=8), civil society leaders (n=6), service delivery practitioners (n=6), and local administrators and traditional leaders (n=5). This composition ensures diversity across institutional levels and sectors (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) <sup>[37]</sup>. The sample size of 25 is consistent with qualitative guidelines emphasising data saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017) <sup>[7, 27]</sup>.

### Data Collection

Data collection employs two methods. First, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 participants allow flexibility to explore emergent themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2012) <sup>[32, 49]</sup>. Interview guides cover leadership practices, legitimacy perceptions, service delivery challenges, and reform proposals. Second, document analysis reviews government policies, budget allocations, service reports, UN assessments, and civil society reports (Bowen, 2009) <sup>[6]</sup>. Combining interviews and document analysis enhances triangulation and credibility (Denzin, 2012).

### Data Analysis

Data are analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006<sup>[7]</sup>, 2021) six-phase approach: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and writing (Nowell et al., 2017) <sup>[42]</sup>. Themes are identified deductively from the theoretical framework (neo-patrimonialism, state-in-society, fragile state theory) and inductively from participants' responses (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) <sup>[22]</sup>. Trustworthiness is enhanced through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Korstjens & Moser, 2018) <sup>[31]</sup>.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols are strictly observed (Israel & Hay, 2006) [30]. Approval is sought from an institutional ethics committee (Resnik, 2015). Informed consent is obtained from all participants (Christians, 2005) [12]. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained using pseudonyms and secure data storage (Tolich, 2004). Given South Sudan's politically sensitive context, special care protects participants from risks, including avoiding questions that could expose individuals to reprisals (Wood, 2006; Sriram et al., 2009) [50].

## Results

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study sampled 25 participants with diverse backgrounds relevant to governance, leadership, and service delivery in South Sudan.

The demographic profile reveals that the sample was predominantly male (72%), reflecting the gender imbalance in South Sudan's governance and leadership positions. The majority of respondents (84%) were aged 36 years and above, indicating that participants possessed significant experience and seniority.

In terms of education, 92% held at least a Bachelor's degree, with 48% holding Master's degrees, demonstrating high levels of formal education among participants. The professional categories were well distributed, with policymakers (32%), civil society (24%), practitioners (24%), and local administrators (20%) represented. Most respondents (76%) had over 10 years of professional experience, suggesting deep institutional knowledge. The majority worked in government (36%) and civil society (28%), with 60% based in Juba and 40% in state capitals, ensuring diverse geographic perspectives. This composition ensures rich, informed insights into leadership, legitimacy, and service delivery across institutional levels and sectors.

## Findings

### Leadership Practices and Institutional Legitimacy (RQ1)

This section presents findings on how prevailing leadership practices shape institutional legitimacy and public trust in South Sudan. Thematic analysis of interview data revealed three dominant themes addressing Research Question One.

#### Theme 1: Personalized Authority and the "Big Man" Syndrome

Participants consistently described leadership in South Sudan as highly personalized, with authority concentrated in individual leaders rather than institutions. A senior government official stated, "Leadership here is about the person, not the office. People follow individuals, not institutions" (P04, Government Official). A civil society leader elaborated, "The president is seen as the father of the nation, and this paternalistic culture extends to all levels. A governor is not just a governor; he is a chief who controls resources and distributes them to his people" (P11, Civil Society). A practitioner observed, "When a minister changes, the entire department changes. People lose jobs, contracts are cancelled, systems collapse. There are no institutions, only networks of loyalty" (P17, Service Delivery Practitioner).

#### Theme 2: Ethnic Patronage and Exclusionary Politics

Ethnicity emerged as a dominant factor shaping leadership and perceptions of legitimacy. A local administrator explained, "The government is seen as Dinka dominated. If you are not Dinka, you feel excluded, and you do not trust the system. Many communities rely on their own traditional leaders instead of the state" (P22, Local Administrator). A civil society representative noted, "Ethnicity is the currency of politics. Appointments, contracts, even access to services depend on who you know and which community you belong to. This destroys any sense of national legitimacy" (P08, Civil Society). A service delivery practitioner added, "People see the state as serving certain ethnic groups. This erodes trust, especially among marginalized communities" (P15, Health Worker).

#### Theme 3: Weak Institutional Culture and Impunity

Participants highlighted the absence of institutional culture, accountability, and professional norms. A policymaker reflected, "We have laws and policies on paper, but they are not implemented. There is no consequence for breaking rules. Nobody respects institutions" (P02, Government Official). A service delivery manager stated, "Corruption is normalized. People expect to pay bribes for services, and leaders expect to enrich themselves. This destroys public trust" (P19, Health Practitioner). A traditional leader observed, "Our leaders make promises, but they never deliver. There is no accountability. People have lost hope in the system" (P24, Traditional Leader).

### Leadership Deficits and Service Delivery (RQ2)

This section presents findings on the mechanisms through which leadership deficits undermine service delivery outcomes, and what institutional reforms could break the destructive cycle. Thematic analysis revealed four themes addressing Research Question Two.

#### Theme 1: Resource Diversion and Patronage Networks

Participants described how leadership prioritises patronage over public service. A senior government official stated, "Money that should build hospitals and schools goes to pay loyalists and buy weapons. Leaders maintain power this way, not by serving the people" (P05, Government Official). A civil society leader elaborated, "The oil money disappears. Roads are never built, hospitals have no medicine, schools have no teachers. Meanwhile, leaders build mansions in Juba and Nairobi" (P12, Civil Society). A health practitioner lamented, "Our facility received only 20 percent of its allocated budget last year. Funds were redirected. This happens every year" (P18, Health Practitioner).

#### Theme 2: Political Interference and Professional Disempowerment

Participants highlighted how political interference undermines service delivery. A health manager stated, "Political leaders appoint unqualified relatives to run hospitals. They have no medical training, but they control budgets and hiring. This destroys the health system" (P20, Health Manager). A government official acknowledged, "Civil servants are not allowed to do their jobs. Politicians give orders, and if you do not follow, you are fired. Professionalism does not exist" (P06, Government Official). A school head explained, "Teachers are appointed based on

political connections, not qualifications. Students suffer, but nobody cares" (P16, Education Practitioner).

### **Theme 3: Fragmented Service Delivery and Humanitarian Dependence**

Participants described how state withdrawal has left service delivery fragmented and dependent on international actors. A civil society representative stated, "The government does not provide services. It is the UN and NGOs that run our hospitals, feed our children, and drill our water. This is not sustainable" (P09, Civil Society). A local administrator observed, "In my county, there is no government presence. People rely on humanitarian agencies for everything. The state is invisible" (P23, Local Administrator). A practitioner added, "We do the work of the government, but we have no authority. Communities see us as outsiders. This creates confusion and undermines trust" (P21, Humanitarian Worker).

### **Theme 4: Erosion of Public Trust and Social Cohesion**

Participants identified a direct link between service failure and erosion of public trust. A traditional leader stated, "When people do not receive services, they lose trust in government. They turn to their own communities, to chiefs, to militias. This divides the country" (P25, Traditional Leader). A civil society representative explained, "Citizens have given up on the state. They see it as predatory, not protective. This is why violence recurs" (P10, Civil Society). A practitioner reflected, "Communities demand accountability, but they receive nothing. If the state cannot provide basic services, why should they respect it?" (P14, Service Delivery Manager).

### **Theme 5: Proposed Institutional Reforms**

Participants identified several reforms to break the destructive cycle. A government official recommended, "We need strong oversight institutions, like an independent anti-corruption commission and a functional auditor general. Without accountability, nothing will change" (P01, Government Official). A civil society leader proposed, "Decentralization would help. If states and counties control their own budgets, communities can hold local leaders accountable. Power must move away from Juba" (P13, Civil Society). A practitioner suggested, "We must professionalize the civil service. Protect them from political interference. Pay them properly. Then they can deliver services" (P19, Health Practitioner). A traditional leader added, "We need to revive traditional governance systems and integrate them with formal structures. Communities trust their chiefs. This trust can be a foundation for legitimacy" (P24, Traditional Leader).

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Leadership Practices and Institutional Legitimacy (RQ1)**

The findings reveal that leadership practices in South Sudan fundamentally shape institutional legitimacy through personalized authority, ethnic patronage, and weak institutional culture. These findings align with and extend the three theoretical frameworks underpinning this study.

First, the theme of personalized authority and the "big man" syndrome confirms neo-patrimonial theory, which posits that formal institutional rules are subordinated to personalized relationships of patronage (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Erdmann & Engel, 2007) <sup>[21]</sup>. Participants

described how leadership is centered on individuals rather than offices, with ministers and governors exercising authority as personal fiefdoms rather than institutional representatives. This finding echoes Theron's (2022) <sup>[52]</sup> observation that South Sudan's political culture is militarized and personalized, shaped by decades of liberation struggle where command replaced negotiation. The consequence, as participants noted, is institutional fragility where systems collapse with every leadership change. This personalization of authority directly undermines institutional legitimacy because citizens and civil servants view state institutions as extensions of individual leaders rather than autonomous, rule-bound entities (Clapham, 1996; Hyden, 2006) <sup>[13, 29]</sup>.

Second, the theme of ethnic patronage and exclusionary politics resonates with state-in-society theory, which explains how societal actors particularly ethnic groups command greater legitimacy than the formal state in weak institutional contexts (Migdal, 2001) <sup>[41]</sup>. Participants consistently described how leaders mobilize ethnic constituencies to maintain power, reinforcing a zero-sum political logic where state capture by one group is perceived as exclusion by others. This finding supports Eaton's (2018) and Roach's (2023) <sup>[17, 48]</sup> analyses that ethnic affiliation has become the primary source of political authority in South Sudan, eroding any sense of national legitimacy. The consequence is fragmented legitimacy, where marginalized communities withdraw trust from the state and rely on traditional authorities, militias, or community-based structures for protection and services (Boege et al., 2008; Risse, 2011) <sup>[58]</sup>. This fragmentation perpetuates the cycle of mistrust and undermines the state's capacity to govern effectively.

Third, the theme of weak institutional culture and impunity aligns with fragile state theory, which identifies weak institutional capacity as a defining characteristic of fragile states (World Bank, 2011; DFID, 2015) <sup>[18, 58]</sup>. Participants described a culture where corruption is normalized, rules exist only on paper, and leaders face no consequences for mismanagement. This finding is consistent with De Waal's (2014) <sup>[15]</sup> characterization of South Sudan as a "political marketplace" where governance is conducted through patronage, violence, and rent distribution rather than formal rules and accountability. The absence of institutional culture and impunity systematically erodes public trust, as citizens perceive the state as predatory rather than protective (Migdal, 2001) <sup>[41]</sup>. This erosion of legitimacy has profound implications, as participants noted, because without trust, citizens have no reason to cooperate with state institutions or respect state authority.

The convergence of these three themes reveals that leadership practices in South Sudan create a self-reinforcing cycle of delegitimization. Personalized authority undermines institutional development, ethnic patronage fragments national identity, and impunity erodes public trust. Each factor compounds the others, creating a governance environment where state institutions are weak, legitimacy is contested, and citizens look elsewhere for protection and services. This finding confirms the conceptual framework's proposition that leadership is the independent variable shaping both legitimacy and service delivery outcomes.



## Leadership Deficits and Service Delivery (RQ2)

The findings reveal four mechanisms through which leadership deficits undermine service delivery: resource diversion, political interference, fragmented service delivery, and erosion of public trust. These mechanisms are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

First, the theme of resource diversion and patronage networks confirms neo-patrimonial theory's explanation that state resources are diverted to patronage networks rather than invested in public goods (De Waal, 2014; Allen & Vlassenroot, 2015) <sup>[3, 15]</sup>. Participants described how oil revenues and budget allocations are redirected to maintain political loyalty, leaving health facilities, schools, and infrastructure chronically underfunded. This finding is consistent with Chipanda's (2026) <sup>[11]</sup> analysis that South Sudan's oil economy is managed through extractive institutions designed to concentrate wealth and power in elite hands. The UN Commission's documentation of \$1.7 billion diverted to companies linked to elites and \$2.2 billion lost to the "Oil for Roads" program underscores the scale of this diversion (UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, 2024) <sup>[54]</sup>. The consequence, as participants noted, is a health sector receiving less than two percent of the national budget, producing some of the worst health indicators globally (UNDP, 2024). This resource diversion is not incidental but structural, reflecting a governance system designed to enrich elites at the expense of citizens.

Second, the theme of political interference and professional disempowerment reflects fragile state theory's identification of political interference as a barrier to effective service delivery (Brinkerhoff et al., 2012; World Bank, 2011) <sup>[8, 58]</sup>. Participants described how politicians appoint unqualified relatives to manage hospitals and schools, control budgets, and override professional decisions. This finding aligns with research on law enforcement agencies, which revealed that "absence of strategic leadership has led to fragmented operations" and "limited internal accountability" (Ekal et al., 2025<sup>[20]</sup>, p. 49). Similarly, analysis of judicial leadership shows the judiciary has been "under siege from both internal and external forces since independence," with public trust deficit constituting a core challenge (Gum, 2025<sup>[26]</sup>, p. 2). The consequence is a hollowed-out civil service where professionalism is impossible, and service delivery is compromised by incompetence, corruption, and political manipulation.

Third, the theme of fragmented service delivery and humanitarian dependence aligns with fragile state theory's description of how service delivery becomes fragmented and dependent on international actors in weak states (Mac Ginty, 2011; Babyesiza, 2015) <sup>[18, 35]</sup>. Participants described how the government's near-total withdrawal from public provisioning has left humanitarian agencies running hospitals, feeding children, and drilling water. This finding echoes Qaddour et al.'s (2025) <sup>[47]</sup> observation that "limited government investment in the health sector has perpetuated reliance on international assistance, and barriers to engagement with government counterparts have restricted coordination". The consequence is a "parallel state" where international actors provide essential services while the formal state remains absent or predatory (Babyesiza, 2015) <sup>[3]</sup>. This dependence is unsustainable and undermines state legitimacy, as citizens see international actors rather than their own government as providers of essential services.

Fourth, the theme of erosion of public trust and social cohesion reveals the cumulative consequence of service delivery failure. Participants described a direct link between service failure and erosion of trust, with citizens turning to communities, chiefs, and militias rather than the state. This finding confirms state-in-society theory's explanation that when the state fails to provide services, societal actors step in, further eroding state authority (Migdal, 2001; Boege et al., 2008) <sup>[40, 41]</sup>. This erosion of trust has profound implications for peace and stability, as participants noted, because citizens who have lost faith in the state are more likely to resort to violence and reject peaceful processes. The self-reinforcing cycle is complete: weak leadership diverts resources, undermining service delivery; poor service delivery erodes legitimacy; and lost legitimacy further weakens the state's capacity to deliver services.

## Proposed Institutional Reforms

Participants identified several institutional reforms to break the destructive cycle, which align with literature on state building in fragile contexts. These include strengthening oversight institutions (anti-corruption commissions, auditor general), decentralization to bring power closer to communities, professionalizing the civil service to protect it from political interference, and integrating traditional governance structures with formal institutions. These reforms address all three theoretical dimensions: they challenge neo-patrimonial practices by introducing accountability; they strengthen state legitimacy by making institutions more responsive; and they build state capacity to deliver services (Abebe, 2026; Auling, 2025; Akec, 2025) <sup>[1, 2, 4]</sup>.

The findings from both research questions collectively confirm the conceptual framework's central proposition: leadership practices shape institutional legitimacy, which in turn affects service delivery outcomes. The cycle of predation, mistrust, and service failure is sustained by neo-patrimonial leadership, fragmented legitimacy, and weak state capacity. Breaking this cycle requires comprehensive reforms that address all three dimensions simultaneously.

## Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between leadership, legitimacy, and service delivery in South Sudan's fragile state context. Guided by two research questions, the study explored how prevailing leadership practices shape institutional legitimacy and public trust, and identified mechanisms through which leadership deficits undermine service delivery outcomes. Drawing on three theoretical frameworks neo-patrimonialism, state-in-society theory, and fragile state theory the study employed a qualitative case study design with 25 participants comprising policymakers, civil society leaders, service delivery practitioners, and local administrators.

## Theoretical Contributions

This study demonstrates the utility of integrating neo-patrimonialism, state-in-society theory, and fragile state theory to understand governance in fragile contexts. Neo-patrimonialism explains personalized authority and resource diversion; state-in-society theory explains fragmented legitimacy and the role of societal actors; and fragile state theory explains weak institutional capacity and service delivery challenges. The study shows these dynamics are

mutually reinforcing, creating a self-sustaining cycle of governance failure. The study extends state-in-society theory by demonstrating how leadership practices actively fragment legitimacy through ethnic mobilization, and contributes to fragile state theory by identifying how leadership choices produce service delivery failure.

### Practical Implications

The findings have several practical implications. Addressing the leadership crisis requires moving beyond technical capacity building to address the political economy of governance. Rebuilding institutional legitimacy requires constitutional reforms to reduce winner-takes-all politics and promote inclusive governance. Improving service delivery requires professionalising the civil service, protecting it from political interference, and investing in health and education. Breaking the cycle of humanitarian dependence requires rebuilding state capacity and shifting international actors from direct service provision to supporting state capacity building.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, development partners, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders working to improve governance and service delivery in South Sudan.

#### Recommendations for National Government

1. **Constitutional and Institutional Reforms:** The government should pursue constitutional reforms to reduce power concentration in the presidency, including presidential term limits, broad political representation, and strengthening state autonomy (Abebe, 2026) <sup>[1]</sup>. These reforms would address ethnic patronage and rebuild institutional legitimacy.
2. **Strengthen Oversight Institutions:** The government should strengthen independent oversight institutions including the anti-corruption commission and auditor general's office, providing adequate resources and protection from political interference (Auling, 2025) <sup>[4]</sup>. This would address the culture of impunity eroding public trust.
3. **Professionalise the Civil Service:** The government should implement merit-based appointments, transparent performance reviews, and protection from political interference (Akec, 2025) <sup>[2]</sup>. This would ensure service delivery is managed by qualified professionals rather than political appointees.
4. **Increase Budget Allocation to Health and Education:** The government should increase health and education budgets to meet international commitments. Currently health receives less than two percent of the national budget, producing some of the worst health indicators globally (UNDP, 2024).
5. **Decentralize Service Delivery:** The government should pursue meaningful decentralization, transferring resources and authority to states and counties to enable local-level service delivery and accountability (Yoh & Ngwenya, 2025) <sup>[60]</sup>.

### Recommendations for Development Partners

1. **Shift to State Capacity Building:** International actors should shift from direct service provision to supporting state capacity building, investing in government systems and institutional strengthening (Qaddour et al., 2025) <sup>[47]</sup>.
2. **Support Accountability Efforts:** Development partners should provide technical and financial support to oversight institutions and use their leverage to pressure leaders to address corruption (Ceesay & Asmorawati, 2025) <sup>[10]</sup>.
3. **Promote Inclusive Governance:** Partners should support national dialogue processes bringing together diverse ethnic groups, political parties, and civil society (Roach, 2023) <sup>[48]</sup>.
4. **Support Decentralization:** Partners should provide technical assistance and funding for local government capacity building and citizen participation (Brinkerhoff et al., 2012) <sup>[8]</sup>.

### Recommendations for Civil Society

1. **Advocate for Accountability:** Civil society should continue monitoring budget allocations, tracking service delivery, and exposing corruption to hold leaders accountable (Eaton, 2018).
2. **Engage Citizens in Governance:** Civil society should engage citizens in participatory budgeting, community monitoring, and civic education to rebuild public trust (Migdal, 2001) <sup>[41]</sup>.
3. **Bridge Traditional and Formal Governance:** Civil society should facilitate dialogue between traditional leaders and formal governance structures to integrate traditional systems with state institutions (Boege et al., 2008) <sup>[40]</sup>.

### Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include the qualitative design and sample size limiting generalisability, potential effects of the political context on participant candour, and restricted document access. Future research should employ quantitative methods, include citizen perceptions through household surveys, conduct comparative research across states, undertake longitudinal studies, and examine successful cases of institutional reform.

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