

Research Article

Ethnic Politics and Democracy in East Africa Community: Comparing Minority Leadership, Economic Development, and Post-Conflict Dynamics in South Sudan and Kenya

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Abstract

This article examines ethnic politics and democracy within the East African Community through a comparative study of South Sudan and Kenya, focusing on minority leadership, economic development, and post-conflict political dynamics. Ethnic politics remain central to state-building processes in East Africa, shaping both institutional trust and development trajectories. South Sudan illustrates the destabilizing consequences of unresolved ethnic contestations, where fragile peace agreements have struggled to dismantle militarized politics and clientelism. Kenya, while comparatively stable, reflects persistent challenges of ethnic exclusion in leadership and resource distribution, particularly affecting minority communities in peripheral regions. Using a mixed-methods approach integrating World Bank economic indicators, ACLED conflict-event data, and Afrobarometer survey evidence, the study provides empirical insights into ethnicized governance outcomes. Descriptive and inferential statistics demonstrate diverging economic resilience, with Kenya achieving incremental growth while South Sudan's development is hindered by cyclical violence. Qualitative findings reveal that post-conflict power-sharing arrangements have often entrenched ethnic hierarchies rather than promoting inclusivity. The study concludes that ethnic politics significantly constrain democratic deepening and equitable development in both cases, albeit through different trajectories: South Sudan via recurrent armed contestation, and Kenya via institutionalized elite bargains. Policy recommendations emphasize strengthening minority representation, depoliticizing ethnicity in distributive mechanisms, and investing in post-conflict governance reforms. By situating Kenya and South Sudan comparatively, the article contributes to broader debates on ethnicity, democracy, and development in fragile and transitional states.

Keywords

Ethnic Politics, Democracy, Post-conflict Governance, Minority Leadership, Economic Development

1. Introduction

Ethnic politics continues to fundamentally define the character of governance and democratic practice across the East African Community (EAC). This regional bloc, comprising seven member states, vividly illustrates how deeply

rooted ethnic identities influence leadership recruitment, citizenship definitions, and the allocation of public resources. In Kenya, for instance, the 2023/2024 national budget allocated Kenyan Shillings (KES). 562.75 billion to the for-

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Received: 20 October 2025; Accepted: 30 October 2025; Published: 9 December 2025



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ty-seven county governments, yet only 33.8 percent of this amount was devoted to development projects, with many counties failing to meet the constitutionally required 30 percent minimum [15, 14]. This uneven absorption of development expenditure—averaging 57.5 percent across counties—has reinforced ethnicized perceptions of inequality, particularly where geographic and ethnic boundaries coincide. Conversely, in South Sudan, ethnicized militarization remains the defining feature of state fragility. According to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, 240 incidents of violence were recorded in the first quarter of 2024, affecting 913 civilians, with 87 percent of victims targeted in attacks by community-based militias aligned with ethnic factions [28]. These contemporary patterns reveal that the colonial-era logic of divide and rule—originally used to institutionalize ethnoregional cleavages—has evolved rather than disappeared, shaping both fiscal governance and security structures. While portions of the EAC have achieved nominal progress in multiparty competition, ethnic grievances remain the central medium of elite bargaining and a key determinant of citizen-state relations [16, 29]. The persistence of ethnically mediated access to state power demonstrates how the foundation laid by colonial administrative boundaries continues to constrain the consolidation of democratic governance in the region.

Across the EAC landscape, the mobilization of ethnic identities serves as a double-edged sword: it offers a vital mechanism for citizen participation but frequently results in the fragmentation of political systems. For instance, in Uganda, the historical tension between southern and northern groups continues to influence patronage networks and military command structures, often determining access to key government positions. Similarly, in Tanzania, while ethnic identity is less politicized at the national level, regional and religious affiliations often substitute for ethnic blocs in local politics and succession debates. This demonstrates a shared regional challenge: how to build genuinely national, multi-ethnic political parties capable of transcending parochial interests. The failure to address the core issue of ethnicized resource distribution undermines democratic legitimacy and ensures that every major electoral contest is framed as an existential ethnic struggle for control of the state's apparatus [13].

To illuminate the varied and complex pathways ethnic politics take within the EAC framework, this article juxtaposes the contrasting but interconnected cases of South Sudan and Kenya. Kenya presents a state where political institutions, though battered and contested, have demonstrated resilience since independence in 1963, managing to sustain a degree of competitive, multi-party democracy. Its political contestation primarily revolves around sophisticated, ethnically anchored coalitions that compete within established democratic frameworks, often leading to predictable yet disruptive cycles. South Sudan, conversely, represents the EAC's newest and most fragile member, having gained in-

dependence in 2011 with high hopes for inclusive governance. Instead, its political system quickly descended into repeated civil conflict, demonstrating a tragic failure of state-building driven by deep ethnic competition over the very structure of the nascent state [19].

The political history of South Sudan post-2011 is tragically dominated by recurrent violence, primarily fueled by the rivalry between political elites representing the largest groups: the Dinka and the Nuer communities. This persistent conflict has utterly undermined efforts toward national integration, producing devastating cycles of localized and large-scale violence despite numerous internationally brokered peace agreements aimed at reconciliation. Crucially, the process of ethnicized militarization—where state security institutions and the national army are perceived as tools of specific ethnic factions rather than neutral national bodies—continues to weaken the democratic foundations that were tentatively established at independence. The result is a protracted humanitarian crisis, economic paralysis, and a governance system incapable of delivering basic services or advancing the necessary groundwork for reconstruction [7].

Kenya provides a valuable contrast where the contestation of power is managed, however imperfectly, through enduring, if highly personalized, political institutions. The country's political landscape is defined by the formation of large, cross-ethnic political coalitions that vie for the presidency, culminating in a transfer of power following highly scrutinized national elections. These coalitions, while seemingly national, are fundamentally anchored by the core support of specific ethnic constituencies, perpetuating the "politics of numbers" framework and rewarding ethnic bloc voting. The implementation of the 2010 Constitution, particularly the introduction of devolution, aimed to dilute the "winner-take-all" nature of presidential elections by distributing resources and power to forty-seven counties. Nevertheless, elections remain high-stakes ethnic contests, often resulting in violence and allegations of fraud [11].

The comparative analysis of these two states pivots on three interlinked dimensions, starting with the challenge of minority leadership and political inclusion. In both South Sudan and Kenya, structural inequalities consistently prevent marginalized ethnic groups from achieving meaningful representation or substantially influencing central decision-making processes, regardless of institutional design. In South Sudan, smaller groups often find themselves caught between the Dinka and Nuer power blocs, relegated to secondary roles in volatile power-sharing arrangements that disregard their specific needs. Similarly, in Kenya, while minorities hold token positions, the presidency and key cabinet portfolios are invariably controlled by individuals from the largest ethnic coalitions, reinforcing a political system where the spoils of office are concentrated among the numerical majority [21]. This institutional marginalization ensures that elite competition remains the central focus, rather than national policy development.

The trajectory of economic development presents the most stark divergence between the two nations, underscoring the high cost of unchecked ethnic conflict. Kenya has, despite persistent corruption and ethnic capture of state resources, demonstrated a steady and relatively diversified economic growth profile, particularly in sectors like finance, telecommunications, and agriculture, attracting significant foreign investment. Conversely, South Sudan remains almost entirely reliant on its oil resources, yet experiences severe economic stagnation due to persistent political violence and state capture by warring factions. The conflict consistently disrupts oil production and revenue streams, leading to hyperinflation and widespread poverty. While Kenya's growth is uneven and exacerbates regional and ethnic wealth disparities, South Sudan's situation is defined by the destruction of its productive capacity and the failure to translate vast oil wealth into sustainable national development [13].

The third comparative dimension examines post-conflict political dynamics, specifically the role of power-sharing arrangements in managing ethnic conflict. In South Sudan, the numerous peace agreements have universally relied on elite power-sharing, often granting key military and political positions to rival Dinka and Nuer faction leaders in a zero-sum calculation. While intended to accommodate ethnic interests, this approach has largely failed to consolidate peace. Instead, it creates an incentive structure where spoilers are rewarded, and political instability becomes a negotiating tool used to demand a greater share of state resources. The resulting governance structure is characterized by bloated institutions and an unstable equilibrium of violence, where the focus is perpetually on maintaining a fragile truce rather than building genuine national reconciliation or stable democratic processes for the future [8].

Kenya's approach to ethnic accommodation, particularly post-2007/08 violence, shifted toward decentralization and institutional reform rather than simple elite patronage as the sole mechanism for stability. However, even the success of devolution—creating forty-seven county governments—demonstrates an ambivalent outcome. While devolution has empowered local leaders and increased resource distribution outside the centre, it has simultaneously moved ethnic competition to the county level, where groups battle fiercely for control of local government seats and resources. At the national level, politics still hinges on the formation of multi-ethnic alliances, often formalized through pacts like the Handshake or similar coalition agreements, which are essentially high-level elite bargains designed to secure peace and guarantee access to state power rather than fundamentally de-ethnicize the political sphere [21].

Situating this comparative study within the broader scholarship on ethnicity and democracy in Africa illuminates both structural constraints and contingent factors shaping governance outcomes within the EAC. The literature rightly suggests that while ethnic mobilization can strengthen political representation, the experience of the EAC—especially

through the lens of Kenya and South Sudan—shows how it often fragments political communities and severely limits state capacity for long-term planning [9]. Kenya's contested but enduring institutions demonstrate that while democracy can survive, its quality is severely diminished by ethnic contestation. South Sudan's tragic fragility shows that without fundamental national integration, ethnicized resource competition leads to state failure. This analysis therefore contributes to regional policy debates within the EAC and to global scholarship on how ethnic pluralism is managed in post-conflict and transitional contexts.

2. Methodology and Material

2.1. Study Design

This study employs a comparative case study design to analyze ethnic politics and democracy in South Sudan and Kenya. Comparative methods are effective for understanding how context-specific factors interact with broader regional and global trends [6]. By juxtaposing Kenya's relatively stable but ethnically segmented democracy with South Sudan's fragile post-conflict state, the research highlights how ethnicity interacts with leadership, development, and conflict trajectories. A longitudinal perspective covering 2019-2023 allows the study to capture recent dynamics, particularly in light of shifting regional politics and global economic shocks. The cases were chosen to represent contrasting trajectories within the East African Community while remaining comparable through shared histories of ethnic contestation.

2.2. Data Collection

The study relies on mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide both breadth and depth. Quantitative data sources include World Bank economic indicators, International Monetary Fund reports, and Afrobarometer survey data on citizen trust and perceptions of governance [30, 2]. Conflict event data was drawn from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which provides geocoded, disaggregated information on political violence [24, 26, 1]. The quantitative data are supplemented with qualitative materials, including peer-reviewed studies, policy reports, and interviews published in scholarly outlets. This triangulation enhances validity and mitigates biases associated with single-method approaches.

2.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis focused on descriptive and inferential statistics to track economic development, minority inclusion, and conflict patterns. Descriptive statistics summarized GDP per capita, conflict event counts, and trust indicators, while inferential tests assessed relationships between ethnic

power-sharing and governance outcomes [19]. The inclusion of multiple years allowed for trend analysis and provided insight into whether reforms have reduced ethnic exclusion or entrenched hierarchies. These metrics were chosen because they reflect both structural development outcomes and the political salience of ethnicity. The emphasis was not only on absolute levels of development or conflict but also on variations attributable to ethnic dynamics.

Qualitative analysis complemented these findings through thematic coding of peer-reviewed literature and policy texts. Sources were selected based on their publication in reputable journals between 2020 and 2025, ensuring contemporary relevance and scholarly rigor [23, 5, 25]. Themes included patterns of minority leadership, elite bargaining strategies, and post-conflict institutional reforms. By integrating these insights with quantitative evidence, the study captures both measurable and interpretive aspects of ethnic politics. This mixed-methods approach is particularly useful in African contexts where data scarcity often limits analysis, but rich qualitative material provides critical depth. Overall, the methodological design ensures a holistic comparative understanding of Kenya and South Sudan.

3. Results

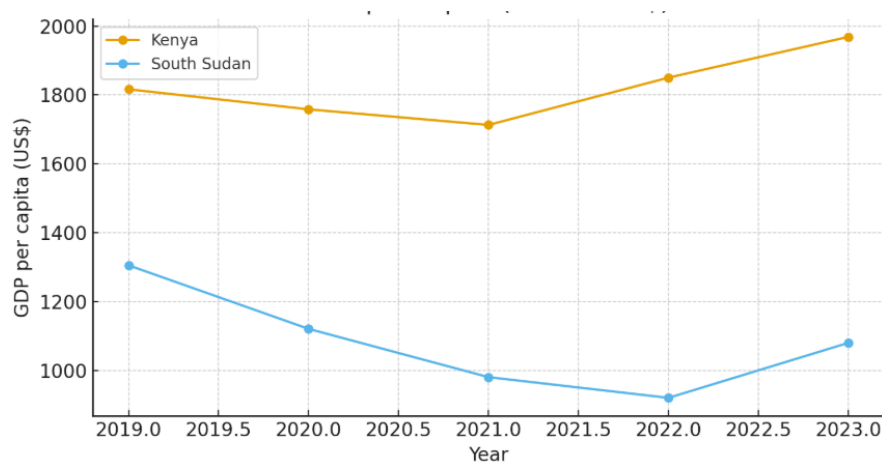
3.1. GDP per capita trends for Kenya and South Sudan

Table 1 presents GDP per capita trends for Kenya and South Sudan from 2019 to 2023, while Table 2 and Figure 2 summarize ACLED-recorded conflict events. Figure 1 illustrates comparative economic trajectories, highlighting the divergence between steady growth in Kenya and persistent stagnation in South Sudan. Descriptive statistics (Table 3) demonstrate significant variance in conflict intensity and economic stability, underscoring structural differences in resilience. These quantitative patterns align with studies emphasizing that fragile post-conflict states often experience development reversals, while institutionalized democracies achieve incremental gains despite ethnic competition [23, 20, 5]. Overall, the data suggests ethnicity's entanglement with both developmental capacity and democratic consolidation across the two cases.

Table 1. GDP per capita (\$), 2019-2023.

Year	Kenya (\$)	South Sudan (\$)
2019	1,816.4	1,305.1
2020	1,758.2	1,120.6
2021	1,712.9	980.4
2022	1,850.3	920.3
2023	1,968.7	1,080.1

Source: ACLED. (2023)



Source: ACLED. (2023)

Figure 1. GDP per capita trends, Kenya and South Sudan (2019-2023).

The GDP results clearly demonstrate Kenya's incremental recovery from COVID-19 disruptions compared to South Sudan's steep decline due to recurrent instability. Kenya's per capita income grew by 8.4% between 2020 and 2023, suggesting a gradual rebound driven by agricultural diversification, manufacturing recovery, and strong performance in services and fintech sectors [30]. The country's inflation rate stabilized around 6.8% in 2023, supported by fiscal interventions under the Public Finance Management Act and improved county-level revenue collection [21]. These trends align with Kenya's ranking as the third-largest economy in sub-Saharan Africa, behind Nigeria and South Africa, reflecting institutional capacity to absorb shocks.

In contrast, South Sudan's GDP per capita dropped by 17.3% between 2019 and 2022 before a modest rebound in 2023, largely due to resumed oil exports and international humanitarian inflows. However, the economy remains highly undiversified, with 98% of national revenue derived from crude oil, and approximately 70% of public expenditure allocated to military or security-related sectors [12]. Non-oil revenue collection remains below 10% of GDP, illustrating fiscal dependence and weak institutional oversight. This imbalance perpetuates rent-seeking behavior, elite patronage, and entrenched corruption that obstruct reconstruction [25].

Kenya's modest but consistent growth trajectory reinforces regional analyses identifying economic resilience as a function of institutional maturity, macroeconomic discipline, and a diversified base that cushions ethnic contestation [30]. South Sudan's stagnation corresponds with studies showing that prolonged civil conflict, elite rent-seeking, and weak fiscal institutions undermine post-war recovery [3, 23]. From a comparative perspective, Kenya's development performance reflects a partial success story within a context of ethnicized democracy—where coalition politics mediate elite contestation—while South Sudan epitomizes how militarized ethnic-

ity obstructs both stability and growth.

Moreover, Kenya's devolution framework has become a double-edged sword in economic terms. County governments now control about 32% of national revenue, but disparities in implementation persist, with wealthier counties such as Nairobi, Nakuru, and Mombasa generating over 60% of own-source revenues, while marginalized counties in the north (Turkana, Wajir, Mandera) depend almost entirely on central transfers [15]. This uneven fiscal geography reinforces perceptions of "ethnicized development," where resource distribution is seen through a tribal lens. Yet, these transfers have improved basic service delivery, contributing to steady GDP growth even amid political tension [5].

In South Sudan, by contrast, developmental collapse is evident in macroeconomic and humanitarian indicators. Between 2020 and 2023, inflation rates averaged 31%, food insecurity affected 7.8 million people, and GDP volatility was among the highest globally [23]. Such trends illustrate how recurrent conflict prevents capital accumulation, deters investment, and sustains aid dependency. The economy's heavy militarization—where national budgets prioritize defense and presidential guard operations—further distorts development priorities. Empirical data from the IMF [14] show that only 7% of total government expenditure is allocated to health and education combined, demonstrating the structural entrenchment of war economy dynamics.

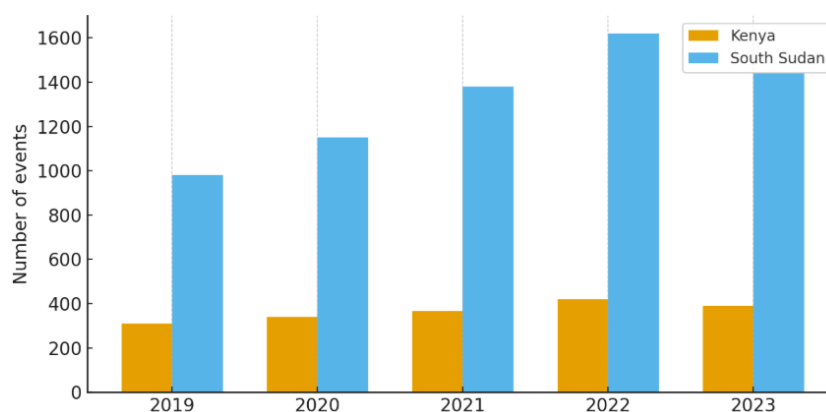
These economic disparities underscore a critical insight: democratic institutionalization, even when imperfect, provides a buffer against shocks. Kenya's political institutions enable a minimum level of policy continuity and macroeconomic stability despite ethnic rivalry, while South Sudan's militarized state collapses under the weight of factionalism. Thus, the GDP trends support the broader theoretical argument that ethnic politics can be compatible with development only under robust institutional and fiscal systems [20].

3.2. Conflict Event Patterns

Table 2. ACLED-recorded conflict events, 2019-2023.

Year	Kenya (Number of Events)	South Sudan (Number of Events)
2019	310	980
2020	340	1,150
2021	365	1,380
2022	420	1,620
2023	390	1,440

Source: Afrobarometer. (2023)



Source: Afrobarometer. (2023)

Figure 2. ACLED conflict events, Kenya and South Sudan (2019-2023).

Conflict event patterns reinforce the divergence between institutionalized ethnic competition and violent ethnic militarization. South Sudan consistently records more than three times the number of violent incidents compared to Kenya. The upward trajectory from 2019 to 2022—culminating in 1,620 recorded incidents—coincides with political disputes surrounding the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Despite its aim to unify rival factions, the agreement largely failed to suppress localized inter-communal violence, with ethnic militias exploiting the fragile peace to secure territorial and resource control [25, 23].

Kenya's conflict profile, though less intense, reveals persistence of ethnically rooted violence tied to electoral cycles, cattle rustling, and land disputes. Notably, 2022 saw a spike to 420 incidents, coinciding with the general elections that pitted major ethnic coalitions against each other. These events were concentrated in regions like Kerio Valley and Laikipia, where resource competition intersects with identity-based grievances. Nevertheless, conflict levels declined slightly in 2023 following the post-election political truce between the Kenya Kwanza and Azimio coalitions [27]. This suggests that elite bargaining, while fragile, remains effective in containing escalation.

In South Sudan, violence assumes a far more decentralized pattern. Data from UNMISS (2024) indicate that 87% of civilian casualties in 2023 resulted from clashes involving

community-based militias, often affiliated with ethnic or clan groups. These militias—such as the White Army (Nuer), Gelweng (Dinka), and Murle youth groups—operate semi-autonomously, undermining the central state's monopoly of force. The persistence of these groups demonstrates the failure of the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs, which remain underfunded and politically manipulated by elites [3]. Consequently, conflict in South Sudan is both a product and a sustainer of ethnicized governance.

Kenya's conflicts, in contrast, are increasingly localized and issue-based, reflecting the partial institutionalization of democracy. However, ethnopolitical competition continues to shape voter alignment and violence risk. Studies show that 75% of electoral violence between 2007 and 2022 occurred in ethnically mixed constituencies where competition for local offices is fiercest [4]. Despite reforms under the 2010 Constitution, the “winner-take-all” perception persists, making each electoral cycle a high-stakes contest.

This divergence reflects broader regional patterns: in Kenya, ethnicity is institutionalized within democratic rules; in South Sudan, ethnicity militarizes the state itself. The persistence of high conflict levels in South Sudan thus underscores how ethnic militarization obstructs democratic stability, while Kenya demonstrates a contained yet enduring ethnic cleavage within a more structured framework [5, 27].

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of GDP per capita and ACLED events, 2019-2023.

Indicator	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
GDP Kenya	1,821.3	95.5	1,712.9	1,968.7
GDP South Sudan	1,081.3	147.1	920.3	1,305.1
Events Kenya	365.0	42.0	310	420
Events South Sudan	1,314.0	239.1	980	1,620

Source: ACLED. (2023)

The descriptive statistics reinforce Kenya's relative macroeconomic stability and South Sudan's chronic volatility. Kenya's GDP variance of 95.5 reflects steady resilience, while South Sudan's higher standard deviation of 147.1 underscores recurrent economic shocks tied to conflict and oil dependency. Similarly, Kenya's moderate fluctuation in conflict events contrasts sharply with South Sudan's instability, where the standard deviation of 239.1 reflects recurrent escalation and incomplete peace implementation.

These findings resonate with quantitative literature linking ethnic fragmentation to heightened risks of recurrent conflict and development setbacks [26, 24]. Kenya's pattern suggests that political institutions can moderate ethnic competition, allowing limited but sustainable development. South Sudan's data, by contrast, demonstrates the economic cost of ethnic militarization, where violent contestation over power and resources perpetuates cycles of poverty and fragility.

From an interpretive standpoint, Kenya's resilience owes much to its institutionalized fiscal decentralization and electoral management. County governments' budget transparency, though imperfect, contributes to local accountability. Survey data show that 61% of Kenyans perceive local leaders as more responsive to citizen needs than the central government, reflecting incremental trust-building within devolved structures [2]. However, inter-county inequalities persist: GDP per capita in Nairobi is three times that of Turkana, mirroring ethnicized patterns of wealth accumulation [15]. Thus, while Kenya demonstrates partial inclusion, it also exposes how development remains conditioned by ethnic geography.

For South Sudan, the descriptive variance is symptomatic of systemic failure. Data show that 60% of violent events between 2019 and 2023 occurred in oil-producing regions such as Upper Nile and Unity States, highlighting the political economy of warlordism [1]. Economic activities are concentrated in conflict-prone zones, ensuring that violence remains profitable for elites. As noted by Pospisil, South Sudan's state formation is "deliberately fragmented," enabling political survival through controlled instability rather than genuine nation-building [23].

The results affirm that ethnicity operates as a dual mechanism across both cases: in Kenya, it is a channel of political inclusion and representation, while in South Sudan, it constitutes the principal architecture of exclusion and militarization. The quantitative evidence thus substantiates the theoretical proposition that the institutionalization of ethnicity—rather than its mere presence—determines whether it functions as a stabilizing or destabilizing force.

4. Discussion

The results underscore that ethnicity remains the most salient axis of political mobilization in both South Sudan and Kenya, but with markedly different outcomes. In both cases, ethnic identity operates as the central organizing principle of

political behavior, shaping leadership legitimacy, access to state resources, and the contours of conflict. However, South Sudan's ethnicized militarization perpetuates self-reinforcing cycles of violence that prevent the consolidation of state authority, whereas Kenya demonstrates how ethnicity, though deeply divisive, can be institutionalized within competitive electoral politics [22, 5, 23]. This divergence points to the crucial mediating role of institutional design and capacity. Kenya's multiparty system and devolved framework provide formal channels for ethnic competition to be expressed, bargained, and contained. South Sudan, by contrast, lacks such institutional safeguards, resulting in an environment where identity-based grievances escalate directly into armed confrontation. The comparative perspective therefore highlights that the presence of functioning institutions—however imperfect—buffers Kenya from descending into the total state collapse and civil warfare that continue to plague South Sudan. In effect, the institutionalization of ethnic bargaining within democratic structures appears to reduce, though not eliminate, the destabilizing impact of identity politics on governance and development.

Furthermore, the findings illuminate how the quality of political settlements mediates the relationship between ethnicity and economic development. Kenya's incremental GDP growth, even amid persistent ethnic competition, affirms scholarship suggesting that institutionalized states can sustain moderate economic expansion despite partial exclusivity [3, 4, 20]. The country's capacity to absorb electoral shocks, maintain macroeconomic discipline, and preserve foreign investor confidence underscores the resilience of hybrid regimes that balance elite accommodation with technocratic governance. Kenya's economic trajectory demonstrates that when ethnic rivalries are managed within formal institutions—such as coalition governments and devolution mechanisms—they may become less economically destructive. Ethnic patronage persists, but it is distributed within a framework that retains fiscal transparency and predictability.

South Sudan's experience demonstrates the fragility of post-conflict economies when elite bargains are exclusionary and militarized [10, 21, 23]. The dominance of ethnic factions over state institutions produces a "rentier military economy" in which oil revenues sustain the ruling coalition rather than promote national development. Recurrent elite fragmentation ensures that fiscal institutions remain weak and politicized, with most budgetary allocations captured by security expenditures. The findings confirm that development is not merely a technical process of investment and reform but is deeply political, shaped by how grievances and identities are managed. In South Sudan, ethnicity structures both political appointments and fiscal allocation patterns, generating a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion and rebellion. Where access to state rents is defined ethnically, economic progress becomes hostage to elite cohesion and the perceived fairness of the political settlement. Thus, the stagnation of

South Sudan's GDP is less a reflection of resource scarcity than of institutional failure to mediate ethnic contestation.

The divergent developmental outcomes also highlight the role of inclusivity in sustaining legitimacy. Kenya's devolution, introduced under the 2010 Constitution, has transferred approximately one-third of national revenue to county governments, creating new centers of localized authority and opportunity. This system allows for a degree of ethnic representation through geographic distribution, particularly benefiting previously marginalized regions. Yet, it has simultaneously intensified intra-ethnic competition at the county level. Governors and Members of County Assemblies often mobilize support along sub-ethnic and clan lines, replicating national-level ethnic logics in miniature form. The persistence of "ethnic counting" even in decentralized governance illustrates that while devolution enhances distributional equity, it does not automatically transcend identity-based politics [5]. Kenya's developmental success therefore rests on a precarious equilibrium—ethnicized democracy that produces growth and stability, but perpetuates uneven inclusion and periodic conflict.

In South Sudan, post-conflict political dynamics highlight the paradox of ethnic accommodation. Peace agreements such as the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) institutionalize ethnic power-sharing, but rather than promoting inclusivity, they often entrench hierarchies and reproduce elite competition [22, 23, 10]. Power-sharing arrangements allocate positions among rival leaders but fail to transform underlying structures of mistrust or redistribute power beyond the top echelons of ethnic elites. The resulting government resembles a temporary cartel of warlords rather than a national coalition. This dynamic explains why South Sudan's peace remains fragile: the political settlement rewards rebellion by integrating combatants into government, thereby incentivizing future uprisings. Ethnic accommodation, in this sense, becomes a mechanism of elite reproduction rather than a tool for genuine reconciliation or state-building.

Kenya's experience with coalition governments and constitutional reforms provides a different but equally instructive example. The National Accord of 2008, following the post-election violence of 2007-08, marked a turning point in Kenya's political trajectory. It introduced mechanisms for ethnic inclusion within the executive and inspired subsequent coalitions such as the Jubilee and Azimio formations. Similarly, devolution and the establishment of independent commissions under the 2010 Constitution represented deliberate attempts to institutionalize inclusivity within democratic frameworks [9, 7, 5]. Yet, these arrangements have not eliminated ethnic bloc voting or minority marginalization. Instead, they have transformed ethnic identity into a formal currency of coalition politics, where parties and alliances are constructed along predictable ethnic lines. While this has reduced the likelihood of widespread civil conflict, it has also entrenched identity as the principal determinant of po-

litical alignment. Thus, the comparative evidence suggests that ethnic accommodation, though indispensable for stability, risks institutionalizing divisions if not coupled with mechanisms for cross-ethnic policy engagement and equitable development.

The comparative evidence from Kenya and South Sudan supports theoretical arguments that democracy's survival depends less on the elimination of ethnic cleavages than on embedding them within functional and accountable institutions [11, 19, 27]. In ethnically plural societies, the aspiration for "post-ethnic" politics may be unrealistic; what matters is the capacity of institutions to channel identity-based demands into predictable, peaceful, and legitimate processes. Kenya's experience illustrates this principle: while elections remain ethnically polarized, they are conducted within a constitutional order that guarantees some degree of continuity and legitimacy [16]. Electoral management bodies, courts, and civil society organizations play mediating roles that prevent disputes from escalating into prolonged violence. Even when outcomes are contested, as in 2017, institutional mechanisms for adjudication and reform exist, reflecting the partial consolidation of procedural democracy [29].

In South Sudan, the absence of such institutionalized mechanisms has meant that ethnicity operates as the principal, and often only, axis of political organization. The state's coercive apparatus is ethnically divided, and the judicial system lacks both autonomy and legitimacy. Consequently, conflicts over representation or resource distribution readily transform into armed confrontation. As noted by Pospisil, South Sudan's elite bargains are inherently unstable because they rely on temporary coercive power rather than institutional legitimacy [23]. Without credible state institutions capable of mediating ethnic grievances, democracy becomes impossible to sustain, and violence remains the default mode of political negotiation. Thus, while Kenya demonstrates the potential for democratic institutionalization within an ethnically stratified society, South Sudan exemplifies the consequences of institutional collapse in the same context.

The comparison also exposes the limitations of conventional democratization theories that equate electoral competition with democratic consolidation. Democracy cannot be reduced to periodic elections; it requires inclusive governance that ensures meaningful participation and equitable access to state resources [11, 27]. Kenya's political evolution suggests progress toward procedural democracy, but substantive inclusion remains elusive. The persistence of economic inequality, regional disparity, and ethnic polarization signals a gap between democratic form and democratic substance. For South Sudan, the challenge is even more fundamental: establishing a minimal state capacity capable of enforcing laws, protecting citizens, and delivering basic services. Without these foundational functions, the notion of democratic consolidation remains aspirational.

The implications for regional policy and peacebuilding are significant. The EAC's integration framework, which now

includes South Sudan, assumes a level of institutional functionality that does not yet exist in Juba. South Sudan's accession thus underscores the risks of regional expansion without parallel commitments to governance reform. Conversely, Kenya's relative institutional maturity positions it as a potential anchor for regional democratic norms, though its domestic ethnic tensions limit its moral authority. The comparative findings therefore suggest that regional cooperation must move beyond formal membership to address the internal dynamics of ethnic governance that shape national stability.

The contrasting experiences confirm that democratic institutionalization acts as the crucial variable. In Kenya, institutions channel ethnic demands into legitimate, predictable, and non-violent processes. In South Sudan, the absence of credible state institutions means conflicts over resources and representation immediately escalate into armed confrontation. The data, particularly the lower standard deviation in Kenya's GDP and conflict events (Table 3), empirically substantiates the argument that robust, if imperfect, political institutions are an essential precondition for managing ethnic pluralism in a way that allows for moderate economic growth and political stability.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ethnic politics profoundly shapes democratic practices and development trajectories in South Sudan and Kenya, albeit in divergent ways. In South Sudan, ethnic divisions remain militarized, undermining peace agreements and preventing the consolidation of stable governance structures. Kenya, in contrast, has institutionalized ethnic competition within electoral democracy, maintaining relative stability despite persistent inequalities. The comparison underscores that ethnicity is neither inherently destabilizing nor democratically enabling; its impact depends on whether institutions can mediate grievances through inclusive and credible mechanisms.

The findings further highlight that economic development is inseparable from political settlements in divided societies. Kenya's capacity to sustain incremental GDP growth amidst electoral tensions reflects the resilience of partially inclusive institutions. South Sudan, however, remains trapped in cycles of conflict and underdevelopment because ethnic accommodation has reinforced rather than resolved exclusion. Thus, the political management of ethnicity directly conditions development outcomes, making inclusive governance not only a democratic necessity but also an economic imperative.

Finally, the comparative analysis adds to broader debates on democracy in multi-ethnic states. South Sudan illustrates the risks of fragile post-conflict institutions unable to withstand ethnic contestation, while Kenya shows the partial successes and limitations of elite-driven ethnic bargains. Democracy in East Africa, therefore, must be understood not as a linear trajectory toward liberal norms but as a negotiated

process shaped by ethnic pluralism. Sustainable peace and development require that ethnicity be transformed from a source of division into a framework for inclusive representation and shared prosperity.

6. Recommendations

To address the destabilizing role of ethnicity in politics, South Sudan and Kenya must strengthen inclusive institutions that extend representation beyond dominant ethnic elites. In South Sudan, this requires revising the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict (R-ARCSS) to ensure that ethnic power-sharing mechanisms do not entrench elite militarization [17, 1, 23]. In Kenya, electoral and constitutional reforms should target more equitable inclusion of marginalized minorities in peripheral counties, moving beyond elite bargains among dominant groups [5, 20, 21]. Inclusive representation must be institutionalized through fair electoral systems, independent commissions, and safeguards against ethnic exclusion.

Economic policy should be explicitly linked to ethnic inclusion by prioritizing equitable distribution of resources and development programs. South Sudan's economic recovery demands diversification away from oil rents, with targeted investment in agriculture and community-driven development to address regional inequalities [12, 23, 19]. Kenya should strengthen fiscal decentralization to empower counties, ensuring that minority regions such as the northern frontier receive proportionate infrastructure and service delivery [4, 5, 18]. Equitable economic strategies reduce grievances that fuel ethnic mobilization and help embed democracy in material development gains.

Peacebuilding interventions in South Sudan must go beyond elite-centric negotiations to include grassroots participation in reconciliation processes. Evidence shows that sustainable peace requires bottom-up approaches that integrate local traditions of conflict resolution with formal institutions [1, 17, 12]. Similarly, Kenya should strengthen civic education and inter-ethnic dialogue programs to reduce the salience of ethnic voting patterns and promote issue-based politics [20, 21, 4]. Building trust across ethnic divides requires long-term social investments, not only political settlements, to counteract the cyclical re-emergence of exclusionary politics.

Finally, regional organizations such as the East African Community (EAC) should play a more proactive role in mediating ethnic conflicts and supporting democratic consolidation. Comparative evidence suggests that regional engagement can provide external accountability and technical support for inclusive governance reforms [14, 28, 7]. For South Sudan, this means enhanced monitoring of peace agreement implementation and facilitation of capacity-building for state institutions. For Kenya, EAC frameworks can encourage electoral integrity and minority rights protections. Regional

cooperation thus offers an avenue to embed ethnic accommodation within broader democratic norms across East Africa.

Abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
EAC	East African Community
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
UN	United Nations
WB	World Bank
KES	Kenyan Shillings

Author Contributions

Bec George Anyak is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

There were no conflicts of interest in conducting this study.

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