

INFLUENCE OF ETHNIC POLITICS ON ETHNIC CONFLICT AND STATE STABILITY IN LAKES STATE, SOUTH SUDAN: A CONVERGENT MIXED-METHODS ANALYSIS

BY

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of ethnic politics on ethnic conflict and state stability in Lakes State, South Sudan, where recurring intercommunal violence intersects with political competition, ethnic mobilisation and contested access to public authority. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed over the period 2020 to 2024. From a target population of 320,229 adults across the state's eight counties, a sample of 400 was determined using Yamane's formula, and 372 usable questionnaires were retained (93.0%). Twenty-two key informant interviews and six focus group discussions involving 52 participants were conducted between October 2024 and February 2025. Eight five-point Likert items measured ethnic politics ($\alpha = .876$) and ten measured state stability ($\alpha = .903$). Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS version 26 using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. Respondents strongly perceived ethnic politics as pervasive ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.04$), with the highest endorsement recorded for the view that politics in South Sudan is influenced by ethnic politics ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.97$), followed by political conflict associated with community displacement ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.01$) and the linkage between political instability and ongoing ethnic conflicts ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.04$). Nepotistic appointments and voting along ethnic lines were the most frequently observed manifestations. Ethnic politics was negatively and significantly correlated with state stability ($r = -.602$, $p < .01$) and remained a statistically significant negative predictor in the four-predictor regression model ($B = -.342$, $\beta = -.318$, $p < .001$), which explained 64.7% of the variance in state stability jointly. Qualitative evidence showed that respondents associated ethnic politics with nepotistic appointments, mobilisation of youth militias, electoral mobilisation, resource diversion and the use of ethnic and clan calculations in public decisions. The study concludes that politicized ethnicity constituted a major perceived destabilizing factor in Lakes State and that strengthening state stability requires institutional measures that constrain ethnic patronage, improve merit and accountability in public appointments, support equitable political participation and reduce the mobilization of ethnic identity for political advantage.

Keywords: ethnic politics, ethnic conflict, state stability, political mobilization, ethnic polarization, nepotism, South Sudan, Lakes State

Introduction

Ethnic conflict has remained a defining feature of post-Cold War politics, repeatedly undermining state stability and reshaping the architecture of international peacebuilding (Yousaf, 2025). Once politicized, ethnicity can become a powerful basis for political mobilization, patronage and exclusion, allowing identity to function not simply as a social affiliation but as a political resource that can shape access to power and public goods (Baker, 2024; Seife, 2022). Although the manifestations differ across contexts, studies of identity politics consistently show that

ethnic mobilization becomes particularly destabilizing when political competition, institutional weakness and unequal resource distribution reinforce one another (Jonyo, 2024; Yousaf, 2025). The resulting concern is therefore not ethnicity itself, but the political processes through which ethnic identity is converted into competing claims over state authority, resources and security.

These dynamics are especially visible in Africa, where political institutions have frequently developed alongside strong communal identities and where competition for public office can be interpreted

through ethnic and regional networks. Kenya's experience shows how electoral competition can activate ethnic solidarities and produce violence even within comparatively institutionalised political systems (Barriga et al., 2023; Nyamweno & Chepcheng, 2023). In Ethiopia, ethnic federalism sought to organise political representation around identity while also creating institutional incentives that have been associated with the politicisation of territorial and ethnic boundaries (Belay, 2024; Jibat et al., 2025; Kleppe, 2022). Comparative African scholarship further links ethnic mobilisation to political exclusion, unequal resource distribution and weak accountability, suggesting that the consequences of ethnic politics extend beyond elections into governance, economic opportunity and social cohesion (Folorunsho & Samuel, 2025; Jonyo, 2024; Kalu & Aniche, 2024).

South Sudan presents an especially acute setting in which these dynamics intersect with conflict and fragile state institutions. Since independence in 2011 the country has experienced recurrent large-scale violence, including the civil war from 2013 to 2018, while implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement has been constrained by elite competition and fragmented political interests (Kisaka et al., 2022; McCrone, 2021). Research on South Sudan has repeatedly connected instability to elite power struggles, ethnic identity and the allocation of political positions and resources along communal lines (Kulang, 2021; Musa, 2022; Niyitunga & Wamaitha, 2023). In this context, ethnic politics is relevant to state stability because political competition can deepen communal grievances, encourage mobilisation, shape perceptions of state legitimacy and influence the distribution of public authority.

Lakes State, in the Greater Bahr el Ghazal region, illustrates these localised dynamics. The state is inhabited predominantly by Dinka communities alongside the Atuot and Beli, and has experienced recurring intercommunal violence linked to cattle raiding, revenge attacks, disputes over grazing land and water, and broader governance pressures (Deng et al., 2024; Pospisil, 2023). The study period also included persistent political and institutional contestation. Evidence from South Sudan and the region indicates that conflict and political mobilisation interact through displacement, livelihood disruption and declining trust in public institutions (De, 2024;

Nurcahyani et al., 2025). In Lakes State, therefore, the political use of ethnicity cannot be treated separately from the violence it helps organise and the institutional instability that violence reinforces.

The implications for state stability are substantial because localised conflicts and politicised identities can combine to weaken the state's capacity to maintain law and order, administer justice, provide services and sustain legitimacy. This study defines state stability as the capacity of government to maintain law and order, deliver essential services and prevent internal conflict from escalating into widespread violence. It treats ethnic politics as the deliberate or observed use of ethnic identity in political competition, public appointments, political mobilisation, electoral behaviour and resource allocation. In Lakes State, existing evidence points to concerns over nepotistic appointments, political mobilisation along ethnic lines, ethnic polarisation and the linkage between political instability and communal conflict. Yet systematic mixed-methods evidence examining these relationships across all eight counties remains limited. This article addresses that gap by focusing specifically on the influence of ethnic politics on ethnic conflict and state stability in Lakes State.

Statement of the Problem

Lakes State has continued to experience intense intercommunal violence despite national peace commitments and repeated peace building efforts. While studies have identified resource competition, weak institutions, insecurity and historical grievances as important drivers, the political processes through which ethnic identity is mobilised and translated into public decisions have received less systematic sub-national measurement (Deng et al., 2024; Kulang, 2021; Musa, 2022). The problem is significant because political competition can influence both the occurrence of conflict and the ability of state institutions to respond to it. When appointments are perceived to favour relatives and kin, when voting is organised around ethnic identity, or when political actors mobilise youth along communal lines, political institutions can become associated with group advantage rather than public authority.

The problem is particularly visible in Lakes State because the same political environment operates alongside recurring cattle conflict, displacement and

weak service delivery. Existing scholarship links ethnic politics in South Sudan to elite competition, fragmented party structures, nepotism and the failure to construct a sufficiently inclusive national identity (Aboug, 2024; Kulang, 2021; Musa, 2022; Niyitunga & Wamaita, 2023). Comparable evidence from Kenya, Ethiopia and Sudan indicates that ethnic political mobilisation can shape electoral behaviour, resource allocation and institutional legitimacy (El Dakroury, 2025; Jibat et al., 2025; Jonyo, 2024). However, these studies do not provide state-wide empirical evidence from Lakes State showing the prevalence of ethnic political practices, the forms they take, and their statistical relationship with perceived state stability.

The central problem addressed here is therefore empirical. There is limited systematic, quantified and mixed-methods evidence on how residents across Lakes State perceive ethnic politics, how its principal manifestations are experienced, and whether stronger perceptions of ethnic politicisation are associated with lower perceived state stability. Without such evidence, responses to ethnic conflict may concentrate on immediate violence while giving insufficient attention to the political mechanisms that sustain exclusion, patronage and mobilisation. This study addressed that gap using evidence from all eight counties and integrated quantitative measures of ethnic politics with qualitative accounts of how political identity operated in public life.

Research Objective

To examine the influence of ethnic politics on ethnic conflict and state stability in Lakes State, South Sudan.

Research Question

1. What was the influence of ethnic politics on state stability in Lakes State, South Sudan?

Research Hypothesis

H03: Ethnic politics has no statistically significant influence on state stability in Lakes State, South Sudan.

Literature Review

Theoretical Review

The study was anchored on two complementary theories, which together explain the structural incentives through which ethnicity can become politicised and the social relationships that shape the

consequences of politicisation. Conflict Theory provides the principal lens for understanding competition over political power, resources and institutional access, while Traditional Peacebuilding Theory contributes an understanding of social cohesion, community legitimacy and the relational consequences of political exclusion.

1. Traditional Peace building Theory: This perspective stresses indigenous mechanisms, cultural norms and community-led efforts in resolving conflict and promoting stability (Major et al., 2024). It treats conflict as a disruption of social relationships to be repaired rather than only as a violation to be punished, and therefore emphasizes restoration, dialogue and inclusion (Bird, 2021). Lederach's (1997) concept of conflict transformation highlights the relational, cultural and structural dimensions of conflict and the importance of grassroots and middle-range actors. Applied to ethnic politics, the theory suggests that politicisation becomes particularly damaging when political competition fragments community relationships, excludes groups from decision-making and weakens local trust. Its limitation for this objective is that community legitimacy alone cannot explain elite decisions over appointments, elections or public resources, which require attention to formal political incentives.

2. Conflict Theory: This perspective sees society as composed of groups with competing interests, with conflict arising from unequal access to power, resources and economic opportunity (Baker, 2024). Originating with Marx (1867/2010; Marx & Engels, 1848/2012) and extended by Coser (1956) and Dahrendorf (1959), it directs attention to power relations, inequality, elite interests and institutional competition. In Lakes State, the theory helps explain why ethnic identity can become a political instrument: access to public office, resources and security can generate incentives for political actors to mobilise group loyalties, reward kin and allies, and portray competitors as threats. Studies of South Sudan and other African contexts similarly connect ethnic politics with nepotism, elite power struggles, unequal resource distribution and political instability (Kulang, 2021; Musa, 2022; Ogele, 2022; Seife, 2022). For this objective, Conflict Theory predicts that stronger

perceptions of politicised ethnicity will be associated with weaker state stability because political institutions become arenas of group competition rather than broadly legitimate public authority.

Conceptual Definitions

Ethnic politics is defined in this study as the use, mobilisation or institutionalization of ethnic identity in political competition, public appointments, electoral behaviour, resource allocation and access to state authority. Ethnic conflict refers to violent or non-violent disputes between ethnic groups driven by competition over resources, political power, historical grievances or cultural differences; in Lakes State this includes intercommunal clashes, cattle raids and revenge killings involving Dinka sub-clans, the Atuot and the Beli. State stability refers to the capacity of government to maintain law and order, deliver essential services and prevent internal conflicts from escalating into widespread violence. These concepts are analytically connected because ethnic politics can shape who receives power, whose grievances are addressed, and how political competition affects conflict and institutional legitimacy.

Empirical Review

Ethnic Politics and Identity Mobilisation: Comparative literature shows that ethnic identity becomes politically consequential when leaders and institutions convert social affiliations into mechanisms of political competition. Yousaf (2025) argues that identity politics can provide representation and cultural recognition but can also be weaponised to deepen divisions, justify exclusion and facilitate violence. Seife (2022) similarly observes that ethnic politics can become the dominant currency of competition where institutional accountability and programmatic politics are weak. Evidence from Ethiopia shows how the formal political recognition of ethnicity can sharpen territorial boundaries and political competition when institutional incentives encourage mobilisation around identity (Jibat et al., 2025; Kleppe, 2022). These studies indicate that the political consequences of ethnicity depend not simply on diversity but on how political institutions structure incentives for mobilisation.

Political Patronage, Nepotism and Governance:

Patronage represents one mechanism through which ethnic politics can become embedded in state institutions. Kulang (2021) identifies unfair distribution of government positions, corruption, nepotism and elite power struggles as important dimensions of ethnic conflict and statehood in South Sudan. Kalu and Aniche (2024) likewise argue that leadership recruitment and the orientation of political leadership influence whether ethnicity reinforces narrow constituencies or broader national unity. Research on decentralisation in South Sudan shows that formal institutional arrangements can be weakened by elite capture, ethnic gerrymandering, inadequate resources and weak accountability (Kueigwong, 2022; Kwori, 2022). The implication is that ethnic politics may influence stability through ordinary administrative practices, not only through moments of overt violence.

Electoral Mobilisation and Resource Distribution:

Political mobilisation along ethnic lines is also visible in electoral processes and the distribution of public resources. Ogeto (2022) found in Kenyan border communities that ethnic and regional voting patterns, multiparty elections and politically influenced resource sharing contributed to conflict. Jonyo (2024) similarly links ethnicity, political mobilisation and resource distribution to unequal economic outcomes. El Dakroury (2025) demonstrates how ethnic diversity, political institutions, violent conflict and economic inequality can interact in electoral settings in Sudan. These findings are relevant to Lakes State because the study's indicators include ethnic influences on electoral processes, diversion of public resources along ethnic lines, and the linkage between politics, poverty and unemployment. They also suggest that ethnic politics can generate material grievances that later feed back into conflict.

Ethnic Politics, Conflict and State Stability in South Sudan:

South Sudanese studies place elite competition and political fragmentation near the centre of conflict recurrence. Niyitunga and Wamaita (2023) identify political discontent associated with elite power struggles, ethnic identity and ideological polarisation as major drivers of relapse, while Aboug (2024) finds that party fragmentation along ethnic lines constrained

implementation of the 2018 peace process. Musa (2022) characterises ethnic politics as a fundamental source of instability in Sudan and South Sudan, while De (2024) shows how elite fragmentation can produce cascading consequences for service delivery and socioeconomic recovery. The common thread is that political institutions can transmit elite competition into localised conflict and then absorb the costs of that conflict through declining legitimacy and weakened service delivery.

Lakes State and the Political Economy of Ethnic Conflict: Evidence specific to Lakes State shows that intercommunal violence occurs within a wider environment of contested governance and weak institutional capacity. Deng et al. (2024) document local perceptions of peace and insecurity, while Pospisil (2023) describes the interaction between state responses, community protection and local power relations. The Customary and Public Order Act of 2022 and the broader decentralization framework illustrate the tension between formal institutional authority and local political realities. The literature therefore points toward a research need that is narrower than the general study of ethnic conflict but more concrete than national-level analyses: measuring how residents experience the political use of ethnicity and how that experience relates to state stability.

Conflict Theory and State Stability: The relationship between ethnic politics and state stability follows from the way political inequality can weaken institutional legitimacy and increase incentives for extra-institutional mobilisation. Folorunsho and Samuel (2025) link poor governance, unequal resource distribution and weak institutions to sub-national conflict, while Berebon (2025) shows that insecurity and economic underdevelopment reinforce one another. In fragile states, therefore, ethnic politics can have consequences across security, governance and economic dimensions. State stability is not limited to the absence of violence; it also includes justice, service delivery, public participation, institutional legitimacy and social cohesion. The present study accordingly treats these dimensions as the dependent construct and examines whether ethnic politics is systematically associated with perceptions of their strength.

Summary of Research Gaps

Much scholarship on ethnic politics is national or comparative, while fewer studies provide state-wide evidence from fragile sub-national settings such as Lakes State. Second, existing South Sudan literature identifies elite competition, nepotism, ethnic mobilisation and fragmented governance, but provides limited quantitative evidence on how ordinary residents perceive these mechanisms across counties. Third, studies often examine political mobilisation, resource allocation or conflict separately, leaving the relationship between ethnic politics and state stability under-integrated. Fourth, qualitative studies richly describe political and communal dynamics but less frequently test the association between politicised ethnicity and a multidimensional measure of stability. This study addressed these gaps by measuring eight indicators of ethnic politics across all eight counties, testing their relationship with state stability, and integrating the statistical patterns with qualitative accounts of political behaviour and institutional legitimacy.

Research Design and Study Area

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately and integrated at interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). Convergence between the strands was treated as support for a substantive conclusion, and divergence was examined as a finding in its own right. The survey component was cross-sectional. The study was carried out in Lakes State, which covers approximately 40,235 square kilometres in the Greater Bahr el Ghazal region and had a population of about 881,000 at the 2008 census (Sudan Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009; World Bank, 2021). Its economy is dominated by pastoralism, and it comprises eight counties: Rumbek Centre, Rumbek East, Rumbek North, Cueibet, Wulu, Yirol West, Yirol East and Awerial. The state was selected because of persistent intercommunal violence among Dinka sub-clans, the Atuot and the Beli, together with governance challenges, insecurity and limited access to social services. Because the counties vary considerably in conflict intensity, ecological conditions and governance, the design allowed variation within the state to be examined. The temporal scope was 2020 to 2024.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population was 320,229 adults, derived by subtracting children under 18 from the 2008 census total, and included community members affected by ethnic conflict, local administrators, security personnel, chiefs and elders, religious leaders, internally displaced persons, victims of violence, civil society and non-governmental representatives, and academics. Payams, the administrative units below the county, were used to identify conflict-prone localities. Sample size was calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula, $n = N / [1 + N(e^2)]$, with $N = 320,229$ and $e = 0.05$, yielding $n \approx 399.50$, rounded to 400 respondents. These were stratified across six stakeholder categories: representatives of ethnic groups and clans (150), government officials (60), traditional and religious leaders (60), youth and women representatives (70), civil society and United Nations agencies (30), and academics (30). Stratified sampling ensured proportional representation across the eight counties, and respondents within each stratum were selected by simple random sampling from lists compiled with local administrators, payam chiefs and civil society organisations. Key informants were chosen purposively (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024) and the

qualitative sample determined by data saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021): 24 interviews and six focus groups were planned, and saturation was reached with 22 key informants and six focus groups comprising 52 participants.

Operationalisation of Variables

Four instruments were used: a structured questionnaire, a key informant interview guide, a focus group discussion guide and an observation checklist. The questionnaire used five-point Likert items from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with demographic and open-ended items. Table 1 presents the operationalisation of ethnic politics and state stability. The ethnic politics scale contained eight items covering political displacement, ethnic influence on politics, links between political instability and ethnic conflict, economic effects, nepotistic appointments, mobilisation along ethnic lines, electoral processes and ethnic polarisation. The state stability scale contained ten items covering law and order, justice, social cohesion, basic services, economic stability, public participation, institutional legitimacy, intergroup trust, minority rights and recovery.

Table 1: Operationalisation of Study Variables

Variable	Type	Indicators / Questionnaire Items	Measurement
Ethnic Politics (8 items; $\alpha = .876$)	Independent	Political conflict has led to displacement of communities; politics in South Sudan is influenced by ethnic politics; political instability is linked to ongoing ethnic conflicts; unemployment and poverty have increased due to ethnic politics; nepotistic appointments have undermined merit-based governance; political mobilisation along ethnic lines fuels violence; electoral processes are influenced by ethnic identity; ethnic polarisation undermines national unity	5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)
State Stability (10 items; $\alpha = .903$)	Dependent	Ten items covering maintenance of law and order; fair administration of justice; social cohesion; access to basic services; economic stability; public participation in governance; institutional legitimacy; intergroup trust; protection of minority rights; recovery of conflict-affected communities	5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)

Note. Conceptual dimensions of state stability: effective governance; equitable justice and rule of law; responsible government; social cohesion.

The qualitative instruments addressed the objective directly. The key informant guide asked how ethnic politics operated in public appointments, elections, resource allocation and political mobilisation, how it

affected intercommunal conflict, and how political institutions were perceived by different stakeholders. The focus group guide explored experiences of ethnic mobilisation, political patronage, exclusion, youth

mobilisation, displacement and the consequences for state legitimacy and stability. The observation checklist recorded visible signs of ethnic tension, governance presence, security activity, displacement and community interactions in conflict-affected settings.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established by having the supervisors and two further subject-matter experts review the draft instruments. Construct validity was supported by a content matrix mapping each item to its construct and research question, and criterion validity by comparing patterns in the primary data with conflict-monitoring databases, government reports and peer-reviewed studies (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The instruments were piloted with 40 respondents in Matagai Payam, Rumbek Centre County, which was excluded from the main sample; three Likert items were subsequently reworded, one probing question added, two open-ended questions simplified, and the Dinka and Atuot translations confirmed intelligible. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha against a 0.70 threshold: the ethnic politics scale returned $\alpha = .876$ and the state stability scale $\alpha = .903$. Test-retest correlations from 12 pilot respondents re-surveyed two weeks apart exceeded 0.80 for all constructs.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The researcher first obtained ethical clearance from The Catholic University of Eastern Africa and a research permit from the Government of Lakes State, and recruited research assistants from the affected communities, proficient in Dinka, Atuot, Beli, English and Arabic, who were trained in a five-day workshop in Rumbek. Main fieldwork ran from October 2024 to February 2025. Questionnaires were administered face to face, with assistants supporting respondents who could not read or write, and key informant interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Focus groups were held in Rumbek Centre, Rumbek East, Cueibet, Yirol West, Yirol East and Awerial, with participants drawn from women, youth and community elders, while field observation covered conflict-affected sites, markets, traditional courts and settlements for internally displaced persons. Where insecurity limited access, in-person interviews were

supplemented by remote interviews and secondary sources, including the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. The study observed informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality and non-maleficence: consent was obtained in writing or orally, identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms and code numbers, and electronic data stored in password-protected files. Qualitative evidence below is accordingly attributed only by stakeholder role and county.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were cleaned, coded and analysed in SPSS version 26, with mean scores interpreted against the scale midpoint of 3.00. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the eight ethnic politics indicators and the reported manifestations of ethnic politics, while a cross-tabulation examined variation in the ethnic politics composite by education level. Pearson product-moment correlation tested the bivariate association between ethnic politics and state stability. Multiple linear regression estimated the association while holding the thesis's three other predictors constant, in the form $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon$, where Y is state stability, X_1 is conflict management strategies, X_2 is ethnic governance structures, X_3 is ethnic politics and X_4 is traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Collinearity was assessed with tolerance and variance inflation factor statistics. Qualitative data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase procedure.

Results

Response Rate and Respondent Characteristics

Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 372 were returned in usable form, a response rate of 93.0%; 22 of the 24 planned key informant interviews were completed (91.7%) and all six focus group discussions took place. Most of the 28 missing or unusable questionnaires came from Rumbek North County, where intermittent insecurity disrupted access. These rates exceed the 70% level commonly regarded as very good for analysis (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003), and all quantitative results below are based on $N = 372$.

Of the 372 respondents, 60.8% ($n = 226$) were men and 39.2% ($n = 146$) were women, the latter proportion deliberately secured through the sampling category reserved for youth and women representatives. The

largest age groups were 26–35 years (33.3%) and 36–45 years (25.8%); 23.4% had primary schooling, 38.2% secondary and 38.4% a diploma or degree. Exposure to conflict was long: 32.0% had experienced it for 10 years or more and 27.4% for seven to nine years.

Descriptive Statistics on Ethnic Politics

Table 2 reports the response distributions, means and standard deviations for the eight ethnic politics items.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Ethnic Politics (N = 372)

Statement	SDA %	DA %	N %	A %	SA %	M	SD
Politics in South Sudan is influenced by ethnic politics	2.7	4.3	6.7	32.5	53.8	4.30	0.97
Political conflict has led to displacement of communities	3.2	4.8	8.1	35.5	48.4	4.21	1.01
Political instability is linked to ongoing ethnic conflicts	3.5	5.9	8.6	36.6	45.4	4.15	1.04
Nepotistic appointments have undermined merit-based governance	3.5	5.4	9.4	38.2	43.5	4.13	1.02
Ethnic polarisation undermines national unity	3.2	5.9	9.7	38.4	42.8	4.12	1.02
Unemployment and poverty have increased due to ethnic politics	4.0	7.5	11.6	36.6	40.3	4.02	1.09
Political mobilisation along ethnic lines fuels violence	4.0	7.0	10.5	39.8	38.7	4.02	1.07
Electoral processes are influenced by ethnic identity	4.6	8.6	13.4	36.6	36.8	3.92	1.13
Composite						4.11	1.04

Note. Rows are ordered by mean. SDA = strongly disagree; DA = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree. The composite mean is the average of the eight item means, and the composite SD is reported for the overall construct.

The composite mean of 4.11 indicates strong respondent agreement that ethnic politics was a major feature of political and conflict dynamics in Lakes State, with every item above the scale midpoint and five of the eight items exceeding 4.00. The highest mean was recorded for the statement that politics in South Sudan is influenced by ethnic politics (M = 4.30, SD = 0.97), followed by the perception that political conflict has led to displacement of communities (M = 4.21, SD = 1.01). The item linking political instability with ongoing ethnic conflicts also received strong endorsement (M = 4.15, SD = 1.04). Nepotistic appointments (M = 4.13) and ethnic polarisation (M =

4.12) likewise recorded high means. Even the lowest item, electoral processes influenced by ethnic identity, remained above the midpoint (M = 3.92, SD = 1.13), indicating that the pattern represented widespread agreement rather than isolated perceptions. The comparatively low dispersion across items suggests substantial convergence among respondents.

Manifestations of Ethnic Politics

Respondents were also asked how frequently they observed five major manifestations of ethnic politics in their communities (Table 3).

Table 3: Manifestations of Ethnic Politics (N = 372)

Manifestation	Always (%)	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely (%)
Appointment of relatives and kin to public office	49.2	31.7	13.4	5.7
Voting along ethnic lines	44.6	32.5	17.2	5.7
Public funds diverted along ethnic lines	41.4	30.6	19.4	8.6
Mobilisation of youth militias by politicians	38.7	32.0	21.0	8.3
Suppression of opposition voices	35.5	31.5	22.6	10.4

Note. Rows are ordered by the combined Always and Often percentages. Source: Field data, 2025.

Appointment of relatives and kin to public office was the most frequently observed manifestation, with 49.2% reporting that it occurred always and 31.7% often, giving a combined 80.9% who reported routine observation. Voting along ethnic lines followed closely, with 44.6% reporting always and 32.5% often, while mobilisation of youth militias by politicians was observed always or often by 70.7%. Public funds diverted along ethnic lines were reported always or often by 72.0%, and suppression of opposition voices by 67.0%. The pattern indicates that ethnic politics

was not confined to electoral rhetoric. Respondents observed it in appointments, political mobilisation, management of public resources and the treatment of political opposition, suggesting a broader political environment in which ethnicity influenced access to office and public authority.

Cross-Tabulation by Education Level

The ethnic politics composite score was cross-tabulated by educational attainment to examine descriptive variation in perceptions (Table 4).

Table 4: Ethnic Politics Composite Score by Education Level

Education Level	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
Primary	87	3.96	1.14
Secondary	142	4.08	1.06
Diploma	64	4.18	0.99
Bachelor's degree	58	4.27	0.94
Postgraduate	21	4.34	0.88

Note. Composite scores range from 1 to 5. The table presents descriptive differences only; no significance test of between-group differences was conducted.

The cross-tabulation showed a monotonic descriptive pattern in which the ethnic politics mean increased with educational attainment, from 3.96 among respondents with primary education to 4.34 among postgraduate respondents. Secondary respondents recorded a mean of 4.08, diploma respondents 4.18, and bachelor's degree respondents 4.27. The direction was consistent across all categories, and even the lowest mean remained close to the agree category. This pattern indicates that perceptions of ethnic

politics were widespread rather than concentrated within a particular educational group, although respondents with higher educational attainment expressed stronger agreement with the propositions concerning the political and destabilising consequences of ethnic mobilisation.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson product-moment correlation assessed the bivariate association between ethnic politics and state stability (Table 5).

Table 5: Correlation Between Ethnic Politics and State Stability

Variable pair	M (EP)	M (SS)	r	p	N
Ethnic politics (EP) – State stability (SS)	4.11	2.69	-.602**	< .01	372

Note. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed). The coefficient indicates a substantial inverse association, with approximately 36% shared variance ($r^2 \approx .36$).

Ethnic politics was negatively and significantly correlated with state stability, $r(370) = -.602$, $p < .01$, two-tailed. Respondents who reported stronger ethnic politicisation tended to report lower levels of state stability. The magnitude of the coefficient indicates that the relationship was substantial within this sample, with approximately 36% shared variance. Because both constructs were measured through self-reported perceptual items in the same cross-sectional survey, the result demonstrates co variation rather than causal

influence. The negative direction nonetheless provides important empirical support for the proposition that ethnic politics and state stability moved in opposite directions in the perceptions of respondents across Lakes State.

Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Multiple linear regression estimated the association between state stability and the four thesis predictors, with ethnic politics treated as the focal independent

variable and the remaining three variables retained as statistical controls (Table 6).

Table 6: Multiple Regression of State Stability on Ethnic Politics and Control Predictors

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	Tol.	VIF
(Constant)	1.243	0.214		5.808	< .001		
Conflict management strategies (control)	0.286	0.057	0.246	5.018	<.001	.612	1.634
Ethnic governance structures (control)	0.114	0.052	0.103	2.192	.029	.687	1.456
Ethnic politics (focal)	-0.342	0.054	-0.318	-6.333	< .001	.781	1.281
Traditional conflict resolution (control)	0.451	0.060	0.412	7.517	< .001	.598	1.672

Model fit: $R = .804$; $R^2 = .647$; adjusted $R^2 = .643$; SE of estimate = .487; $F(4, 367) = 168.547$, $p < .001$.

Note. Dependent variable: state stability; $N = 372$. SPSS reported p values of .000, shown here as $p < .001$. Tol. = tolerance; VIF = variance inflation factor. R^2 refers to all four predictors jointly. Ethnic politics is the focal predictor; the remaining three variables are statistical controls.

The full model was statistically significant, $F(4, 367) = 168.547$, $p < .001$, explaining 64.7% of the variance in state stability jointly. Ethnic politics was a statistically significant negative predictor after the other predictors were held constant ($B = -.342$, $SE = 0.054$, $\beta = -.318$, $t = -6.333$, $p < .001$). Thus, a one-unit increase in the ethnic politics composite was associated with a .342-unit decrease in the predicted state stability score, holding conflict management strategies, ethnic governance structures and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms constant. The tolerance value for ethnic politics was .781 and its VIF was 1.281, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern for the focal predictor. The result is consistent with the bivariate correlation and strengthens the evidence that perceptions of ethnic politicisation were inversely associated with perceived state stability.

The null hypothesis ($H03$) that ethnic politics has no statistically significant influence on state stability in Lakes State was therefore rejected at $\alpha = .05$. The regression coefficient was statistically significant at $p < .001$, while the bivariate relationship was significant at $p < .01$. Because the model is cross-sectional and perceptual, the hypothesis decision establishes a statistically significant association within the model rather than proof of a causal effect.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of 22 interview and six focus group transcripts produced six cross-cutting themes directly relevant to ethnic politics: the political weaponisation of ethnicity, nepotistic appointments and patronage,

electoral and youth mobilisation, diversion and unequal allocation of public resources, displacement

and economic insecurity, and declining trust in formal institutions. The themes provided substantive explanation for the quantitative pattern and helped distinguish ethnicity as a social identity from ethnicity as a political instrument.

Ethnic identity was described as a political instrument in everyday public decisions. Participants referred to political appointments, contract awards, security deployments and other government decisions as being interpreted through ethnic and clan calculations. A civil society representative from Yirol West explained that political life was widely perceived to operate through ethnic considerations rather than solely through merit or programmes. The account suggested that actors seeking political office often had to navigate established ethnic networks because access to institutional opportunities was shaped by the political environment in which they operated.

“Political appointments, contract awards, security deployments, and even humanitarian distributions were widely perceived as decided through ethnic and clan calculus rather than through merit or programmatic considerations.”

The qualitative evidence therefore linked ethnic politics to institutional legitimacy. Respondents distinguished between ethnicity as a normal element of social identity and the political use of ethnicity to determine who receives office, resources or protection. This distinction is important because it suggests that the destabilising process identified by respondents was not ethnic identity itself but its conversion into a

political mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. This finding complements the high quantitative endorsement of the proposition that politics in South Sudan is influenced by ethnic politics ($M = 4.30$). Nepotistic appointments emerged as a particularly visible pathway through which ethnic politics entered formal governance. Respondents described the appointment of relatives and kin to public office as the most frequently observed manifestation of ethnic politics, with 80.9% reporting that it occurred always or often. Qualitative accounts connected these appointments to perceptions of declining merit, unequal access to public employment and reduced confidence that institutions served citizens on an impartial basis.

One recurring concern was that political appointments created secondary effects beyond the immediate beneficiary. When public institutions were perceived as staffed according to kinship or ethnic proximity, respondents reported that trust in decisions made by those institutions declined. This interpretation is consistent with Kulang's (2021) account of nepotism and unfair distribution of state positions as components of instability in South Sudan and with Kalu and Aniche's (2024) emphasis on political leadership and inclusive recruitment. The qualitative evidence thus provides a mechanism linking the high quantitative mean for nepotistic appointments ($M = 4.13$) with broader perceptions of institutional weakness.

Political mobilisation along ethnic lines was also connected to the use of young people in conflict. Respondents reported that mobilisation of youth militias by politicians was always or often observed by 70.7% of the sample. Focus group evidence suggested that young people were particularly vulnerable where political participation offered limited economic opportunities, social recognition or institutional voice. In this context, mobilisation was understood not as an isolated act but as a process through which political competition could translate grievances and insecurity into collective violence.

A related theme concerned electoral mobilisation. Voting along ethnic lines was reported always or often by 77.1% of

respondents. Qualitative accounts linked electoral competition to expectations of ethnic protection, political appointments and resource access, making electoral identity part of wider calculations about who would control public authority. This pattern is consistent with the evidence from Kenya and Sudan showing that ethnicity can shape electoral behaviour and resource distribution (El Dakroury, 2025; Jonjo, 2024; Ogeto, 2022).

Resource allocation and economic insecurity constituted another mechanism. Seventy-two percent of respondents reported that public funds were always or often diverted along ethnic lines, while 76.9% agreed or strongly agreed that unemployment and poverty had increased because of ethnic politics. Qualitative participants described both direct and indirect effects, including preferential access to public resources, disruption of livelihoods during conflict, reduced confidence among traders and investors, and the movement of labour away from productive activities toward survival. These perceptions align with the broader argument that political exclusion and insecurity can reinforce economic marginalisation (Berebon, 2025; Jonjo, 2024).

Displacement was also connected to political conflict. The item stating that political conflict had led to displacement recorded a mean of 4.21, with 83.9% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Participants described displacement not only as a consequence of fighting but also as part of a cycle in which violence, loss of property and political grievance reinforced one another. Once communities were displaced, access to services and livelihoods became more difficult, while experiences of loss intensified claims for political protection and compensation. De (2024) similarly links political and elite fragmentation to wider service and recovery pressures in South Sudan.

The final qualitative theme concerned trust in formal institutions. Respondents described formal institutions as less legitimate when their decisions were interpreted through ethnic or clan networks. This affected perceptions of appointments, justice, security and

resource allocation. The pattern suggests that ethnic politics may influence stability through an institutional pathway: political decisions become associated with group advantage, group grievances grow, and confidence in neutral public authority declines. The observation is consistent with Folorunsho and Samuel (2025), who identify poor governance and unequal resource distribution as important mechanisms connecting political institutions and sub-national conflict.

Ethnic politics was therefore experienced as a cumulative process rather than as a single political event. Participants connected appointments, elections, resource allocation and mobilisation, while describing conflict and displacement as consequences that fed back into subsequent political competition. This mechanism helps explain why the quantitative construct produced uniformly high means: the same political logic was perceived across multiple domains of public

life. The qualitative strand thus supported the interpretation that ethnic politics had a broad institutional and social reach in Lakes State.

Respondents nevertheless distinguished between ethnicity as cultural identity and ethnicity as political instrument. Several accounts suggested that ethnic affiliation remained an important social and cultural identity, but the damaging dimension arose when political actors used that identity to define access, loyalty, protection or entitlement. This distinction is theoretically important because it avoids equating ethnic diversity with instability and instead directs attention toward the institutional incentives governing political competition.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Table 7 sets the two strands side by side for the principal dimensions of ethnic politics examined in the study.

Table 7: Joint Display Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

Dimension	Quantitative evidence	Qualitative evidence	Integrated inference
Political mobilisation	M = 4.02; 78.5% agreed or strongly agreed it fuels violence	Political actors were perceived to mobilise identity in electoral and security competition	Ethnic identity operated as a political mobilisation resource linked to conflict
Nepotistic appointments	M = 4.13; 80.9% always or often observed	Appointments were described as influenced by kin and clan calculations	Patronage weakened perceptions of merit and institutional legitimacy
Electoral mobilisation	M = 3.92; 77.1% always or often voted along ethnic lines	Voting was linked to expectations about group protection and access to office	Electoral competition reinforced group-based political claims
Youth militia mobilisation	70.7% always or often observed	Young people were described as vulnerable to mobilisation amid limited livelihoods and voice	Political competition could translate into organised violence
Resource diversion	72.0% always or often observed	Participants described perceived ethnic allocation of public resources and contracts	Resource distribution reinforced grievances and economic insecurity
Displacement	M = 4.21; 83.9% agreed or strongly agreed	Displacement was described as both a consequence of conflict and a source of new political grievances	Conflict and politicised identity reinforced one another
Institutional trust	M = 4.12 for ethnic polarisation; 67.0% observed opposition suppression	Formal decisions were often interpreted through ethnic and clan networks	Political ethnicisation weakened trust in neutral public authority
State stability	$r = -.602, p < .01; \beta = -.318, p < .001$	Accounts connected political ethnicisation to conflict, service disruption and weakened legitimacy	The quantitative and qualitative strands jointly support an inverse relationship

The integrated evidence shows convergence across the main dimensions. Quantitative results identify ethnic politics as widespread and negatively associated with state stability, while qualitative accounts explain how the relationship operated through appointments, electoral mobilisation, youth mobilisation, resource allocation, displacement and institutional trust. The two strands therefore complement rather than duplicate one another: the survey establishes the breadth and statistical direction of the association, while the qualitative evidence provides the mechanisms and lived experiences that give the association substantive meaning.

Discussion

Ethnic Politics and State Stability

The central finding is that ethnic politics was strongly endorsed by respondents ($M = 4.11$) and was negatively and significantly associated with state stability ($r = -.602, p < .01$; $\beta = -.318, p < .001$). This finding is consistent with the proposition in Conflict Theory that unequal access to power, resources and institutional opportunities can produce group competition and destabilising political behaviour (Baker, 2024; Coser, 1956; Dahrendorf, 1959). It also corresponds with South Sudanese scholarship connecting elite competition, ethnic mobilisation and instability (Kulang, 2021; Musa, 2022; Niyitunga & Wamaitha, 2023). The important empirical point is that the relationship remained statistically significant when conflict management strategies, ethnic governance structures and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms were held constant, indicating that ethnic politics contributed unique explanatory information within the study's four-predictor framework.

The Pervasiveness of Political Ethnicisation

Every ethnic politics item exceeded the scale midpoint, and the highest mean concerned the perception that politics in South Sudan is influenced by ethnic politics ($M = 4.30$). The breadth of agreement is consistent with the literature describing ethnic identity as a major axis of political competition where institutions have weak programmatic or accountability constraints (Seife, 2022; Yousaf, 2025). The finding is also relevant to Lakes State because it suggests that residents did not perceive ethnic politics as a narrow electoral phenomenon. Instead, they associated it with

displacement, political instability, economic insecurity, public appointments, mobilisation and national unity. This multi-domain pattern supports the argument that ethnic politics can become an institutional condition shaping both the supply of political authority and the interpretation of public decisions.

Nepotism and the Legitimacy of Public Authority

Nepotistic appointments constituted the most frequently observed manifestation, with 80.9% reporting that they occurred always or often, and the corresponding perception item recorded a mean of 4.13. This finding closely reflects Kulang's (2021) observation that unfair distribution of state positions and nepotism contribute to instability in South Sudan. It also supports Kalu and Aniche's (2024) emphasis on political leadership and inclusive recruitment as foundations of government effectiveness. The implication for state stability is institutional rather than merely administrative. When public appointments are interpreted as ethnic or kin-based, citizens may evaluate subsequent institutional actions through the same lens, making even neutral decisions vulnerable to suspicion. The erosion of perceived merit can therefore weaken institutional legitimacy even before direct violence occurs.

Electoral Mobilisation, Youth and Conflict

The high frequency of voting along ethnic lines (77.1% always or often) and youth militia mobilisation (70.7% always or often) shows how electoral and security dynamics can become connected. In contexts where access to public office is perceived to determine access to jobs, protection and resources, ethnic voting can become a rational strategy for communities seeking security or representation. Yet the same process can intensify polarisation by framing political competition as group competition. The youth dimension is especially important because mobilisation can transform political grievances into organised violence. This interpretation is consistent with Ogeto (2022), Jonyo (2024) and the South Sudan literature on elite mobilisation and conflict relapse (Niyitunga & Wamaitha, 2023).

Resource Distribution, Poverty and Displacement

The relationship between ethnic politics and economic insecurity was similarly pronounced. Respondents

associated ethnic politics with unemployment and poverty ($M = 4.02$), while 72.0% reported that public funds were always or often diverted along ethnic lines and 83.9% agreed or strongly agreed that political conflict had led to displacement. Jonyo (2024) shows how ethnic political mobilisation can shape resource distribution and inequality, while Berebon (2025) demonstrates the reinforcing relationship between insecurity and underdevelopment. In Lakes State, the findings imply that political ethnicisation may sustain conflict not only through mobilisation but through the economic inequalities that mobilisation helps reproduce. Displacement then feeds back into insecurity by reducing livelihoods, access to services and confidence in institutions.

Political Polarisation and Institutional Trust

The item on ethnic polarisation undermining national unity produced a mean of 4.12, while suppression of opposition voices was reported always or often by 67.0% of respondents. These results suggest that respondents perceived ethnic politics as affecting both relations between communities and the internal quality of political competition. Conflict Theory helps interpret this pattern as a struggle over scarce political resources, but the finding also has a relational dimension. When political rivals are framed as representatives of competing ethnic communities, disagreement can become more difficult to resolve through ordinary institutional processes. This reduces the space for compromise and can increase incentives for political actors to mobilise supporters through identity rather than policy. The result is compatible with Seife's (2022) argument that ethnic politics can weaken accountability by shifting political debate away from programmatic performance.

Comparison With Previous Studies and Theoretical Interpretation

The findings converge strongly with the literature on the political use of ethnicity in fragile and divided societies. The negative statistical relationship between ethnic politics and state stability is consistent with Yousaf (2025) on identity mobilisation, Musa (2022) and Kulang (2021) on South Sudan, and Jonyo (2024) on the interaction between ethnicity, political mobilisation and resources. The qualitative evidence on decentralisation, governance and institutional

capture also aligns with Kueigwong (2022) and Kwori (2022), while the electoral dimension corresponds with Ogeto (2022) and El Dakroury (2025). The present study extends these findings by combining state-wide quantitative measurement with qualitative evidence from Lakes State and by demonstrating that perceptions of ethnic politics remain significantly related to state stability after adjustment for the other thesis predictors.

Theoretically, the findings give stronger weight to Conflict Theory for Objective 3 because the principal mechanisms identified by respondents concern power, access, political competition and unequal distribution of authority. Traditional Peacebuilding Theory remains relevant as a complementary perspective because political mobilisation affects the social relationships that peacebuilding seeks to repair, but the statistical evidence shows that local reconciliation alone cannot explain the negative association identified here. The results therefore suggest that stabilising Lakes State requires attention to the political incentives that encourage ethnic mobilisation as well as the social relationships through which its consequences are managed. Because the evidence is cross-sectional and based substantially on perceptions, this interpretation is consistent with the observed associations and qualitative accounts rather than a causal demonstration.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of ethnic politics on ethnic conflict and state stability in Lakes State, South Sudan. The findings showed that ethnic politics was strongly perceived across the eight counties, with a composite mean of 4.11 and every indicator above the midpoint. Politics in South Sudan was perceived to be strongly influenced by ethnicity, and respondents associated political conflict with displacement, political instability, economic insecurity, nepotistic appointments, ethnic mobilisation and polarisation. Nepotistic appointments and voting along ethnic lines were the most frequently observed manifestations, while mobilisation of youth militias and diversion of public resources demonstrated that ethnic politics extended beyond elections into security and governance.

Ethnic politics was negatively and significantly associated with state stability, both bivariate ($r = -$

.602, $p < .01$) and after adjustment for the other thesis predictors ($\beta = -.318$, $p < .001$). The full four-predictor model explained 64.7% of the variance in state stability, although that variance was attributable to the predictors jointly rather than ethnic politics alone. Qualitative findings clarified the mechanisms underlying the statistical relationship, showing how nepotistic appointments, electoral and youth mobilisation, perceived resource diversion, displacement and weakened trust in formal institutions can connect political ethnicisation with conflict and instability. The null hypothesis was rejected. The evidence therefore indicates that ethnic politics represented a major perceived destabilising factor in Lakes State, although the cross-sectional design does not establish causation.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the study offers the following recommendations.

1. Strengthen merit-based and accountable public appointments. The Government of South Sudan and the Government of Lakes State should strengthen transparent recruitment, documented qualification criteria, conflict-of-interest procedures and independent oversight for senior public appointments.
2. Reduce political mobilisation along ethnic lines. Government, electoral institutions, civil society organisations and peacebuilding partners should support political processes that reward programme-based participation, protect opposition voices and reduce incentives for the mobilisation of youth militias.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Several limitations should be considered. The study covered only Lakes State, so the findings cannot be assumed to apply to states with different demographic, ecological or political conditions. Insecurity limited access to some of the most affected communities, and because most unusable or unreturned questionnaires came from Rumbek North, residents there may be under-represented. Many interviews required translation from Dinka, Atuot or Beli; this risk was reduced through pre-tested translations and bilingual research assistants, but some loss of meaning cannot be ruled out, and given the sensitivity of political and

ethnic questions some respondents may have been reluctant to answer candidly. The survey was cross-sectional and the principal constructs were measured through self-reported perceptions in the same instrument, so the associations cannot be interpreted as causal and may be affected by common-method variance. The education cross-tabulation was descriptive rather than a formal significance test, and the regression model estimated ethnic politics alongside the other thesis predictors rather than isolating it from all possible political, economic and security influences. Further research should therefore examine ethnic politics longitudinally, compare Lakes State with other South Sudanese states, and investigate how reforms alter conflict dynamics over time. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the magnitude, generalisability, and causal meaning of the reported statistical associations within this study context.

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